

Textual Superimposition and Illegibility in the Poetic Text

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ABSTRACT

This practice-led thesis examines the use of textual superimposition and illegibility in innovative poetic texts. The introductory pages provide a taxonomy of the use of textual superimposition in both the literary and visual arts from 1909. The thesis then moves in Chapter One to an analysis of the book *Condensations* by Nathan Walker to provide a systematised method for reading texts that feature overprinted and illegible areas. Drawing from structuralist and formalist modes of literary criticism, particularly that of Veronica Forrest-Thomson in *Poetic Artifice*, the thesis provides a schematic by which the reader can attempt to negotiate and naturalise the textually superimposed text via normative reading modes.

Following this, Chapter Two contains a discussion on textual superimposition and illegibility as a graduated process by which the legible text is made illegible and analyses the consequences for the text of such processes. The discussion focuses on Rosmarie Waldrop's *Camp Printing* and considers the overprinted text as an object produced incrementally. The chapter ends with an argument focussed on the shift of the text from 'textual' to 'figural' space.

The final chapter, Chapter Three, shifts theoretical focus in an analysis of the use of illegibility in the collagic poems of Susan Howe in the book *Debths*. The discussion draws on Derridean notions of the archival mark to consider the collage as a mode of resistance to the traditional formation and stewardship of the archive. This chapter also considers collage in the context of what Lyotard terms the 'developmental human' and reflects on textual superimposition as a

subversive act designed to resist the suppression of the individual by an overarching capitalist superstructure.

The thesis also contains a statement of poetics and a number of creative works that have been produced as part of the practice-led methodology. These works constitute a central body of evidence and sit alongside the exegesis as a fundamental method of investigation. Their varied forms make explicit the consequences for the word of textual superimposition and evidence the function of the illegible in innovative poetic texts.

Keywords: illegibility, textual, superimposition, innovative, poetry, writing, process, printing, poetics, collage

VOLUME ONE: THE EXEGESIS

The following practice-led thesis is presented in two volumes. The contribution to knowledge is produced via the synthesis of two investigative approaches. The first volume contains the exegesis and features critical and theoretical analyses of existing innovative poetic texts in three case studies. Each text features divergent uses of textual superimposition. These texts are *Condensations* (2017) by Nathan Walker, *Camp Printing* (1970) by Rosmarie Waldrop, and *Debths* (2017) by Susan Howe. The first volume also contains a statement of poetics.

The second volume contains a number of creative works produced towards the investigation of textual superimposition and the consequent production of illegibility in the poetic text. The works represent a variety of constructive methods and the mode of their production, as well as their final forms, provide one means by which to demonstrate an original contribution to knowledge. The exegesis is not a paraphrasing document that explains the creative works. Rather, the two volumes constitute a cohesive investigative methodology that provides two differing but interrelated modes of examination and analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

The two central questions this thesis considers are:

1. How can writers use textual superimposition in innovative poetic texts?
2. What are the consequences when the written word becomes illegible?

The answering of these two research questions concerns the word as considered in two different but related guises: as both one element of the linguistic sign and as a material grapheme. These two roles seem divergent but can and do coexist. I use as an exemplar the application of textual superimposition, the overprinting of the grapheme to affect the state of partial or whole illegibility and this thesis seeks to theorise the application of textual superimposition as a formal device in experimental poetic texts. I argue that these texts utilise language for both its signifying capabilities and its 'graphic' or 'material' qualities, and that this necessarily requires diverse reading modes that exceed customary processes associated with a normative reading of the legible text.

European theorisation of the linguistic sign has its premise in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose linguistic theory delineates the sign as bipartite, describing its composition as made up from the 'signifier' (the word or, more accurately, a sequence of sounds) and the 'signified' (a concept of a thing). These two elements constitute the linguistic 'sign' as a whole.¹ Jonathan Culler describes language as humanity's archetypal sign system due to Saussure's objective description of the word as 'conventional'.² To describe the linguistic

¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 76.

² Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p. 5.

sign as conventional is to say that it is not motivated towards the concept of the object to which it is associated and that its position in the sign system relies upon its users' knowledge of the conventions of a given language.³ For example, there is nothing about the English word 'tree' that necessarily infers that it must be used to denote the concept of 'tree'. This is obvious when we consider that the word is substituted for 'baum' in German, 'träd' in Swedish, and 'boom' in Dutch. The divergent nature of these signifiers is indicative of the arbitrary nature of their assignment to the concept of an object, in this case the concept of a tree. This thesis accepts that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary and therefore less important than the possession of knowledge of the conventions of a given language by its users. The shared knowledge of the conventions of a language premises the ability of its users to communicate and this is true for both the spoken and the written word.

The above example is indicative of the functionality of language being premised on an enabling system; words do not exist in isolation. They sit alongside the myriad of other lexical items constituent to a language. Culler suggests that it is the systematic differences between signs that gives them their value. In other words, instances of language use are meaningful due to their relational value to other examples in the language system.⁴ That words do not have an inherent value seems obvious to say if we consider language objectively. Returning to the example word 'tree', it is meaningful only in the sense that it can be differentiated from other signs in the system (such as 'flower' or 'shrub') and

³ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 6.

⁴ Ibid, p. 12.

identified as such in spoken or written evocations premised on the systematised rules understood by the user.

There are parallels also with propositions made by Roman Jakobson, who, during the early to mid-twentieth century, produced the 'clearest model of linguistic method'.⁵ Building on the work of Saussure, Jakobson described the concept of the 'distinctive feature', a minimal dissimilarity present between two phonemes set in binary opposition.⁶ For example, the two pulmonic phonemes /t/ and /d/ share some of the same phonetic characteristics: they are both plosives and they are both alveolar. However, the /d/ phoneme is voiced (consists of the blending of two sound sources) where the /t/ phoneme is unvoiced. It is this distinction that allows the two phonemes to be detected as distinct in words such as 'tap' and 'dap'. The binary nature of the distinction between the phonemic pair premises the boundaries of practical usage and allow the speakers of a language to produce divergent meaning from a finite set of phonemes.

Poems use language as their constituent material and rely upon the signifying character of language to premise the semantic relationship between the text and the reader. In this sense, the use of language in poetry is similarly reliant upon the intrinsic knowledge of the user of the conventions of the sign system. Where poetry transcends the system – in the use of ungrammatical phrases, for example – the anomaly is identifiable in the context of the system and a motivation can be proposed. The tension between the syntactically integral

⁵ Ibid, p. 7.

⁶ Roman Jakobson, Gunnar Fant & Morris Halle, *Preliminaries to Speech Analysis* (Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1961), p. 2.

line and enjambment is a case in point: the grammar is retained but subverted by a line break that runs the sense over from one line to the next.

With this said, one consequence of the use of textual superimposition is to disrupt the integrity of the form of the written grapheme such that its relation to other signs in the system can no longer be ascertained. How is one to engage with the process of reading in this context? This question leads to the first of the case studies, an analysis of textual superimposition and its consequence for normative reading modes in Walker's book *Condensations*.⁷ The text contains many instances of written language use that features illegible marks (Saussure nominates the term 'parole' to denote an instance of language use) that undermine the enabling qualities of the underlying system or 'langue' and disrupts the process of linguistic signification.⁸ Craig Dworkin explains that, somewhat ironically, as a text 'moves even further towards complete illegibility', the 'diminishing capacity' the words have to imply, connote and denote acts to 'foreground the potential of the medium' to signify.⁹ The loss of the word's signifying capabilities has the converse effect of foregrounding its central function as a linguistic unit. This is the case in *Condensations*. Where one detects the diminishing capacity for the word to 'say', the response is the attempt to maintain the normative reading mode, to have the word 'say' even as it moves towards illegibility and resists reading. This is reflected in my own primary impulse, which is to cling onto reading even when the text is moving into and out of illegibility. The discussion on Walker's work draws from the theoretical and

⁷ Nathan Walker, *Condensations* (Axminster: Uniformbooks, 2017).

⁸ Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 16.

⁹ Craig Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), p. 73.

critical thought of writers influenced by Structuralism. To that end, I make use of the schematisation provided by Forrest-Thomson in her book *Poetic Artifice* (2016). However, from Forrest-Thomson's groundwork, I produce an alternate schematic that takes into account the presence of illegible language in *Condensations* and sets forth a means by which to read illegible text.¹⁰ It is from this critical foundation that the thesis moves to further considerations of the consequence for the written word of textual superimposition and further modes by which experimental writers can and do use textual superimposition. More specifically, Chapter Two considers Waldrop's graduated process and its foregrounding of the distinction between the word as linguistic signifier and the word as material grapheme.

The written word becomes material upon its inscription, existent upon the page as a shape in ink. This is true of legible and illegible texts. However, illegibility has the capacity to transform the word such that its function moves from one of transparency (as linguistic signifier) toward a situation where the line between signification and materiality becomes indistinct. The second case study explores textual superimposition as a gradual process, where the word is pushed out of legibility and towards illegibility via a progressive overprinting method. To that end, I discuss the effects upon James Camp's legible poems by Waldrop's printing experiments in *Camp Printing*.¹¹ One inference made by the presence of illegibility is that the reader is required to adopt unconventional modes of engaging with the work. This seems obvious to say if some or all of the language is not readable in the traditional sense, but there is still the matter of

¹⁰ Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2016), p. 39.

¹¹ Rosmarie Waldrop, *Camp Printing* (Providence, RI: Burning Deck, 1970).

exploring what the unconventional modes may be. Waldrop's book is useful as her graduated process displays the tension between what Jean-Francois Lyotard terms 'textual' and 'figural' space. Her text exhibits the shift required in the mode of perception of works that occupy these two different phenomenological spaces.¹² From this discussion I move to analyse appropriation and collagic modes of composition and their effects upon the legibility of a text's constituent material, particularly where the material is harvested from the archive.

The third case study examines further the consequences for the written inscription of superimposition in relation to Howe's book *Debths*, with a focus upon the primacy of the archival mark.¹³ In the form of the archive, the human being places on historical record an account of their existence in the form of the written word. Howe's application of the collagic process in *Debths* draws from such materials as autobiographical and historical texts relating to New England and its historic landscape. The superimpositional process in her work disrupts the archival mark made in these materials such that their signal is dislocated from its context and the meaning is correspondingly interrupted before recontextualisation in a new text. The very pre-eminence of the archive as an authoritative account and, by extension, the importance of the written word in its transmission, is put into question in Howe's work and I explore the fallibility of the written word in the context of her collages. Additionally, I develop these arguments and contextualise them with theories of resistance, particularly to prevailing power structures. Towards this, I draw from the writing of Guy Debord

¹² Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. by Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 205.

¹³ Susan Howe, *Debths* (New York, NY: New Directions, 2017).

on the notion of the 'Spectacle' and Lyotard on the inhumane nature of predominant societal superstructures in *The Inhuman* (1991).

Additionally, all the concepts addressed critically and theoretically in the exegesis in Volume One are also explored creatively. These works are presented towards the latter pages of the thesis in Volume Two. The sequence *Townships* and the poem *2.6.1666/17.4.2017* use the overprinting process as a constructive method in order to explore the consequence for the appropriated word of textual superimposition. These works test the extent to which illegibility can be produced and provide a creative elucidation of the ideas explored in the reading of *Condensations* in the first chapter. The use of appropriated materials is examined in the sequence *Seized*, which explores the subjugated voice and the validity of the archival mark. These ideas are examined in the third of the case studies also, in an examination of *Debths* by Howe. Howe's propensity in *Debths* for the use of collage is further explored in works such as *The Peterborough Chronical & the Mouth* and *The Inhuman*. Also, the potentiality of analogue modes of production such as the letterpress are explored in works such as 'Letterpress' and the procedural methodology of Waldrop in *Camp Printing* is explored in elements of the poetics. Importantly, the creative works do not map absolutely onto chapters in the exegesis. As such, the creative process is not limited by the constraints of the discursive discourse.

Firstly, the thesis moves to provide an account of the prevalence of textual superimposition in textual documents since the seventeenth century. Some of these examples are accidental, the result of malfunctions in the printing process, for example. Those examples where textual superimposition is applied for

creative ends generally begin to surface in the early twentieth century, concurrent with the proliferation of experimental writing that occurred in the west and is collected under the general term of Modernism. As will become clear, the use of textual superimposition in creative works is dictated to some extent by developments to creative procedure symptomatic of experimentation, but also by the invention of more technologically-advanced printing methods.

A Taxonomy of Textual Superimposition

Examples of textually superimposed text precede those that are engaged in the purposeful overprinting of language as a formal device in the creative context. This overview is not intended as a complete index of works where textual superimposition is in use. Rather, I seek to provide an account that taxonomises works into groups delineated by significant developments in the use of, for example, emerging technologies or those loosely collected by innovations in creative and critical practices.

I begin with the palimpsest. Unsurprisingly, a great deal of theoretical exploration of the palimpsest has occurred in the field of archaeological studies. The definition of the palimpsest in such circles differs depending upon the function of the document in a given context, but the most basic description depicts a 'manuscript on which earlier writing has been effaced to make way for new text'.¹⁴ The motivations for these augmentations derives from the necessity to reuse a piece of parchment or vellum due to the scarcity of the product. Also, at the time when materials were reused and palimpsests were produced, the printing process was yet to be invented and the materials required for the mass reproduction of manuscripts were not accessible. Thomas De Quincey describes an initial dichotomy between the 'vehicle', the vellum, and its 'freight', the text, where, in a presupposed stratum, the 'freight of thought' occupied a higher hierarchical level than the 'costly material' upon which it is inscribed.¹⁵ The value

¹⁴ Gavin Lucas, *The Archaeology of Time* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 37.

¹⁵ Thomas De Quincey, *Susperia de Profundis: The Palimpsest of the Human Brain* [online]. The University of Adelaide, updated March 2016. Available from: <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au> [accessed 2 May 2017].

of parchment or vellum was consequent upon its use in a process where the text assumes primacy over the material upon which it was laid. When the textual content becomes less important, it is removed or overprinted with new documentation.

Removal of the initial thoughts from the material is achieved via a chemical process in which 'chemistry' is used to 'discharge the writing from the roll'.¹⁶ The extent to which the earlier text is removed is varied and Bailey delineates several possible outcomes. These range from the 'true' to the 'cumulative' palimpsest, and each describes an object where the overprinting contains divergent characteristics. The true palimpsest, for example, has been made subject to a complete cleaning process that removes 'all traces of earlier activity... except for the most recent'; the cumulative palimpsest is an 'assemblage of materials... that form part of the same deposit but are of different ages'.¹⁷ The Archimedes Palimpsest [see Figure 1], a thirteenth century prayer book containing treatises, speeches and commentaries, features a concurrence of multiple textual prints that are detectable and indicative of the cumulative palimpsest.¹⁸ Indeed, modern technologies allow for the detection of earlier writings that appear lost to the human eye, and The Archimedes Palimpsest is one such example. Scientists studying the palimpsest use electromagnetic radiation to undertake multi-spectral imaging that penetrates and reveals the hidden contents of its pages.¹⁹ The extent of the concealment of earlier writings

¹⁶ De Quincy, *Susperia de Profundis*.

¹⁷ Lucas, *The Archaeology of Time*, p. 10.

¹⁸ *The Archimedes Palimpsest* [online]. Digital: Core Archimedes Data, updated 1 November 2017. Available from: <http://archimedespalimpsest.net> [accessed 2 May 2017].

¹⁹ *The Archimedes Palimpsest*.

affects the degree to which the texts intermix and the transparency or otherwise of each layer is enabling or otherwise of the contemporaneous presence of multiple literary works in one document. The true palimpsest makes appreciable the resolution of the final episode due to the loss of earlier materials. However, the retention in the cumulative document of its constituent materials precludes resolution of any one or all of those textual components. These tensions are represented similarly in later works that apply textual superimposition as a creative device. Such texts share with the palimpsest the indeterminate nature of the reading process of the myriad of writings that constitute the work as a whole.

The capacity for error in scriptural reproductive techniques is well documented but its prevalence in manmade technologies becomes evident as a byproduct of the development of early printing tools and machines.²⁰ The advent of printing in the United Kingdom in the fifteenth century changed dramatically the processes by which texts could be produced and, more importantly, reproduced in the English Language.²¹ Some of these texts feature inadvertent anomalies such as overprinting, smudging and duplications that are symptomatic of mistake on the part of the printer or failure of their machinery. The example in Figure 2 comes from a seventeenth century printing of the play *Aminta: the famous pastoral*. Produced in 1660, bound in red goat skin and kept at the Hamnet Folger Library in Washington State, the example is indicative of the fallibility of the printing press and the errors produced during its use.²²

²⁰ Alexandra Gillespie, *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and their Books 1473-1557* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 11.

²¹ Gillespie, *Print Culture and the Medieval Author*, p. 3.

²² Torquato Tasso, *The Hamnet Folger Library* [online]. The Hamnet Folger Library. Available from: <https://hamnet.folger.edu> [accessed 2 May 2017].

Examples such as those in Figures 1 and 2 derive from necessity or chance rather than from creative experimentation. However, in the early 20th century, anomalies such as this become a feature of innovative poetics and central to a purposeful aesthetic. Consequently, the prevalence of works with the superimposition of text as a formal device begins to increase. In 1909, the French newspaper *Le Figaro* published the 'Manifeste de Futurisme' [Futurist Manifesto], a declaration of Italian Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's artistic and societal stratagem for radical change. The manifesto exalted a poetics of revolt defined by 'l'amour du danger, l'habitude de l'énergie et de la témérité' [the love of danger, the habit of energy and temerity].²³ An aggressive call to arms, the manifesto condemned classicist artworks such as the sculpture *Victory of Samothrace* (also known as *The Winged Victory of Samothrace*) for their immobility, displacing them with revolutionary notions of speed, enthusiasm and violence. Marinetti sought to solicit a riotous response via an appeal to the human condition of suffering, insisting that 'Il n'y a plus de beauté que dans la lutte' [Except in struggle, there is no more beauty]. The ideological hallmarks of fascist thought, particularly in the use of the word 'struggle', is evident in the writing of parts of the Italian intelligentsia before The Great War.²⁴ Marinetti himself produced works in which textual superimposition affects illegibility, the printing of one letterform over another an analogy for the shift away from artistic norms towards a more radical artifice. The letterpress in Figure 3, 'Après la Marne, Joffre Visita le Front en Auto' [After the Marne, Joffre Visited the Front by Automobile] (1919), sees Marinetti subverting the horizontality of the written word by

²³ F. T. Marinetti, 'Le Futurisme', *Le Figaro*, 20 February 1909, p. 1.

²⁴ F. T. Marinetti, 'Le Futurisme', p. 1.

placing language on the page on multiple axes in such a manner as to produce a work defined by its topographical qualities; the form of the piece reminiscent of the battle field map.²⁵ The work's typographical character is experimental in its liberation of the word and the typeface from utilitarian uniformity. Somewhat paradoxically, to achieve the aesthetic of experimental typography Marinetti used an antiquated technology: the letterpress. The process requires the letterform to be in relief from the wooden or metal block upon which it sits. The blocks are grouped together into words or sentences, covered with ink, before an impression is made upon paper or velum. In Marinetti's case, the letters blocks are used singularly and manually during a painstaking process of multiple printings.

This thesis concentrates on the visual significances of textual superimposition for the written word, but Marinetti's experimentations also contain aural consequences. Acting as a score for performance, the sonic character of 'After the Marne' is onomatopoeic in its evocation of the battlefield. This quality is reproduced in others of Marinetti's works. For example, Marinetti's 'Vive la France' – a work more explicit in its application of collage techniques, composed as it is in pencil and cut-and-pasted printed paper – is both vocally expansive and graphically innovative, liberating the written word from syntactic positionality and the spoken word from communicative utilitarianism.²⁶

²⁵ F. T. Marinetti, 'After the Marne, Joffre Visited the Front by Automobile' [online], *The Museum of Modern Art*. Available from: <https://www.moma.org> [accessed 23 May 2019].

²⁶ F. T. Marinetti, 'Vive la France' [online], *The Museum of Modern Art*. Available from: <https://www.moma.org> [accessed 23 May 2017].

Marinetti's 1909 document inspired the further publication of a number of manifestoes during the 1910s. Figures such as Francesco Balilla Pratella and Umberto Boccioni produced manifestoes for Futurist Music and Futurist Painting respectively. Self-published magazines and newspapers provided the loose group the opportunity to compile their artistic efforts, although a dedicated publication of longevity failed to materialise. Working contemporaneously with the Futurists were artists associated with Cubism. In the latter stages of the Cubist movement (between 1912 and 1914 and commonly termed 'Synthetic Cubism') experimentations with perspective stripped the work of three-dimensionality and concentrated upon two-dimensional space. Works contained torn newspaper as well as paint, as is evident in Picasso's 1912 piece *La Bouteille de Suze* [Bottle of Suze] [see Figure 4].²⁷ Whole strips of text are cut away from their original context and pasted into the new object. Some of these pieces are placed over one another, obscuring some of the text to illegibility, severing the syntactic sense with collagic processes.

Also, artists identified with groups such as the Dadaists – founded by the writer Hugo Ball during the First World War and active between 1916 and the mid-1920s – produced myriad works featuring textual superimposition. Whilst Dada built upon recent aesthetic developments made by the Futurists, and particularly Marinetti, the Italian's fascist sensibilities were not replicated in the pacifist politics of figures such as Marcel Duchamp. Working from an anti-war premise, the Dadaists sought to free text from the limitations of syntax,

²⁷ Pablo Picasso, 'Bottle of Suze' [online], *Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum*. Available from: <https://www.kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu> [accessed 23 May 2017].

morphology and punctuation as an analogy to what they saw as the dilution of society by mechanised warfare.²⁸ The 1992 lithograph titled 'Kleine Dada Soirée' [see Figure 5] is a collaborative work from Theo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters.²⁹ The lithograph printing method traditionally involved the drawing of an image onto a stone block with a substance such as wax or oil. The surface is then treated with chemicals such that the unetched areas of the stone absorb water. An oil-based ink is applied and repelled by the water when passed through a press such that the original drawing is printed onto the paper. The text constituent to 'Kleine Dada Soirée' is produced in divergent typefaces and overprinted perpendicularly to the horizontal axis. The monotone character of Marinetti's work can be juxtaposed with that of van Doesburg and Schwitters, who combine monochromatic contrast with colour. In this case, the word 'DADA' in the primary colour red is placed as a foundation layer upon which further layers of black text are superimposed. The primary nature of the colour red hints towards a poetics of simplification, resistant to linguistic signification and the complexities of regulatory grammar.

In 1949, Ilia Zdanevich, an active participant in Avant-Garde movements such as Dada and Russian Futurism, published *Poésie se mots inconnus* [Poetry of Unknown Words], an illustrated book of textual works juxtaposed with woodcuts, etchings, lithographs, engravings and other illustrative mediums.³⁰ Artists included in the book include Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Joan Miró. The work anthologised within its pages are mostly

²⁸ Tate [online]. Dada. Available from: <https://www.tate.org.uk> [accessed 23 May 2017].

²⁹ Theo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters, 'Kleine Dada Soirée' [online], *The Museum of Modern Art*. Available from: <https://www.moma.org> [accessed 24 May 2017].

³⁰ Ilia Zdanevich, *Poésie de mots inconnus*, (Paris: Le Degré Quarante et Un (Iliazd), 1949).

divergent in their formal nature, the text and image presented on the same page but without integration. There are some examples, however, of 'radical experiments in poetic language' that feature the superimposition of text and display an illegibility of sorts.³¹ These include 'In-text Plate (Colophon)' by Pablo Picasso [see Figure 6], where red text and black text amalgamate on the page.³² Another example is 'In-text Plate (Folio 8)' by Jean Metzinger, which also uses inks in red and black but with divergent font sizes in the constituent text.³³ In the context of the book as a whole, the pages that feature textual superimposition are in the minority but also indicative of a decided use of overprinting as a means of blending or destroying texts. The choice of colour in the works of this period is of note. Red and black ink is used in several pieces dating from the early 1920s to the late 1940s. The effect is the delimitation of the text in each colour, such that the language is legible despite being superimposed. This seems antithetical to the production of illegibility if that is the intention for the use of superimposition. This suggests that the placing of one text over another in these examples is not for the purpose of the destruction of language but for the merging of written discourses from different sources that maintains the original form of the texts.

Poésie se mots inconnus and its constituent writers and artists pre-dates the publication of manifestoes from central figures and groups relating to the concrete movement of the 1950s and 60s. In the early 1950s, three years after the publication of Zdanevich's anthology, European artist Öyvind Fahlström

³¹ Johanna Drucker, 'Anthology of the Illegible', *Amodern 6: Reading the Illegible* (2016). Available from: <http://amodern.net/article> [accessed 16 June 2017].

³² Pablo Picasso, 'Intext Plate (Colophon)', *The Museum of Modern Art*. Available from: <https://www.moma.org> [accessed 16 June 2017].

³³ Jean Metzinger, 'In-text Plate (Folio 8)', *The Museum of Modern Art*. Available from: <https://www.moma.org> [accessed 16 June 2017].

coined the term 'concrete' to describe an approach to the poetic text that could be 'experienced and created on the basis of language as concrete material' and not only as 'structure emphasizing the expression of idea content'.³⁴ In the year 1958, the Brazilian group Noigandres (a neologism appropriated from Ezra Pound's *Cantos*), comprising the de Campos Brothers Augusto and Haroldo, and Decio Pignatari, published their 'Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry'.³⁵ The manifesto described concrete poetry and its methods, emphasising the use of 'graphic space as a structural agent' as an antidote to 'linear-temporistical development'.³⁶ The attraction towards the subversion of syntax as a structural agent is nothing new at this stage in the twentieth century, as the Dadaists and the Italian Futurists before them had stated this or similar aims in their own manifestoes.³⁷ There are, however, some aesthetic differences between earlier works and that of the Noigandres. The concrete poems of the Brazilian group and their contemporaries is characterised by the 'clean lines' of 'sans serif fonts' such as Helvetica.³⁸ Use of these typefaces produces an aesthetic characterised by 'cleanness, readability, and clarity'.³⁹ As a result, the presence of superimposition is rare in a poetics that argued that shape and sound in the letterform has mimetic value.⁴⁰ The preservation of the integrity of those letterforms premises the formal character

³⁴ Öyvind Fahlström, 'Manifesto for Concrete Poetry' [online], *UbuWeb Papers*. Available from: <http://www.ubu.com> [accessed 12 June 2017].

³⁵ Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campos, 'Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry', *UbuWeb Papers*. Available from: <http://www.ubu.com> [accessed 12 June 2017].

³⁶ de Campos *et al*, 'Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry', *UbuWeb Papers*.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

³⁸ Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (New York City, Columbia University Press: 2011), p. 59.

³⁹ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, p. 59.

⁴⁰ Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press: 2010), p. 52.

of the written word and the mimetic value it derives from its visuality in many of these works.

Some ten years later in 1968, Mary Ellen Solt published *Concrete Poetry: A World View*.⁴¹ The book is a series of statements and overviews of global developments in concrete poetry, which Max Bense described as the 'first international poetical movement'.⁴² The three documents of Fahlström, the Noigandres, and Solt are representative of the poetic exploits of writers who founded their principles on spatially innovative works such as *Un Coup de Des* by Stéphane Mallarmé and the *Calligrammes* of Guillaume Apollinaire.⁴³ The Noigandres also cite ideogramic methodologies from modernists such as Ezra Pound and James Joyce as formative to their concrete poetics.⁴⁴ The Noigandres' work resembles in some cases that of Pop artists such as Andy Warhol and Kenneth Goldsmith cites Pop Art as an informative influence on the group.⁴⁵ Works such as 'Beba Coca Cola' (1962) from Noigandres member Pignitari borrows from the 'dialectics of... advertising' and appropriates the imagery of consumer culture in a manner similar to Andy Warhol in his 1962 installation *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962).⁴⁶

The poems produced during this period share similar formal characteristics and have come to be described as 'clean' in their application of the

⁴¹ Mary Ellen Solt, 'Concrete Poetry: A World View' [online], *UbuWeb Papers*. Available from: <http://www.ubu.com> [accessed 12 June 2017].

⁴² Max Bense, 'Concrete Poetry 1', in *Concrete Poetry: A World View* [online], trans. by Irene Montjoye Sinor and Mary Ellen Solt. Available from: <http://www.ubu.com> [accessed 12 June 2017].

⁴³ de Campos *et al*, 'Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry', *UbuWeb Papers*.

⁴⁴ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, p. 57.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 60.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 60.

principles of concrete approaches to textual creativity.⁴⁷ Poems such as 'O' by Eugen Gomringer articulate a poetics of 'reduced language' that is 'to be perceived rather than read'.⁴⁸ Innovations such as these are indicative of a poetics that seeks to engage with modernity. 'The visual poem' eschews the notion of received form to adopt 'a word design' that responds and corresponds to the 'designed world' in which it resides and was created.⁴⁹ The design that Solt refers to is that of a 'quick, concentrated visual message' transmitted in abundance throughout the twentieth century via mediums such as 'the headline, the advertising slogan'.⁵⁰

The poetics of 'clean' concrete are important for superimposed texts as they sit in contradistinction to the 'dirty' poems produced by several writers working out of Canada. These writers published materials around the late 1960s through the 1970s and 80s. Poets such as Steve McCaffery, bpNichol and Bill Bissett produced work that 'typifies Dirty Concrete Poetry with its overlaid text, use of mixed-media[...] and embrace of palimpsestic illegibility and anti-representationality'.⁵¹ It is, however, erroneous to suggest that McCaffery *et al* were originators of overprinted poems as examples were being produced in the late 1950s in places such as the United Kingdom. In 1958, the poet Emmett Williams produced 'Like Attracts Like' and 'Rubber Stamp Poem', both anthologised in his edited book *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*.⁵² These two

⁴⁷ Derek Beaulieu, 'Text Without Text: Concrete Poetry and Conceptual Writing' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Roehampton, 2014), p. 10.

⁴⁸ Mary Ellen Solt, 'Introduction', in *Concrete Poetry: A World View* [online]. Available from: <http://www.ubu.com/papers/solt/intro.html> [accessed 12 June 2017].

⁴⁹ Mary Ellen Solt, 'The New Visual Poetry', in *Concrete Poetry: A World View* [online]. Available from: http://www.ubu.com/papers/solt/new_vis_po.html [accessed 12 June 2017].

⁵⁰ Mary Ellen Solt, 'Switzerland', in *Concrete Poetry: A World View* [online]. Available from: <http://www.ubu.com/papers/solt/switzerland.html> [accessed 12 June 2017].

⁵¹ Beaulieu, 'Text Without Text', p. 25.

⁵² Emmett Williams, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Primary Information, 2013).

works can be classified as 'dirty' concrete as the integrity of the form of the grapheme is undermined by its placement in superimposition with other graphemic marks made on the page. The 1960s saw an abundant increase in the use of the typewriter and printing technologies to create poems where multiple printings take place on the one page. The 1988 publication *Changing Forms in English Visual Poetry: The Influence of Tools and Machines* outlines developments in the use of this technology and was produced by Bob Cobbing and printed by the Writers Forum.⁵³ Cobbing exemplifies the use of differing technologies via the presentation of his own works and those by a number of writers, including Dom Sylvester Houédard (dsh) and Peter Mayer. He describes technologies, both analogue and digital, as tools of opportunity in the creative context:

From handwriting to typewriter, to mimeo machine, to photo-copier, to computer; from low-tech to high-tech; workers in offices have made the journey and poets can too.⁵⁴

Cobbing provides a useful chronological summary of technological evolution, at least as far as these methods are relevant to his own work and that of his contemporaries. He points out that machines such as the mimeograph and the computer are invented and manufactured not for the advantage of the artist or creative writer but for utilitarian purposes in the office. However, the practicality of machines such as the photocopier belies their creative potentiality. Within the pages of *Changing Forms*, Cobbing himself collects works under the heading 'Mimeo Misuse'.⁵⁵ This suggests that it is the subversive use of these technologies

⁵³ Bob Cobbing, *Changing Forms in English Visual Poetry: The Influence of Tools and Machines* (London, Writers Forum: 1988).

⁵⁴ Cobbing, *Changing Forms*.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

that widens their creative applications. Error in examples such as the 1660 printing of *Aminta: the famous pastoral* reveals a fallibility in the machine; error in Cobbing's works produced on the mimeograph disclose a purposeful employment and application of error [see Figure 7].⁵⁶ What may once have been an unwelcome disadvantage becomes methodologically central to the production of the superimposed aesthetic.

Works such as Cobbing's 'Stencil of the Announcement of The Destruction in Art Symposium' are successful in their attempts to affect illegibility on once legible texts. The use of the technology is somewhat more prosaic in that the process by which illegibility is achieved remains largely transparent. However, a rudimentary knowledge of the printing technologies provides sufficient ground upon which to hypothesise as to how the works have been produced. In this sense, the process by which the works are produced remains somewhat legible where the product, the text itself, does not. This is echoed in similar works anthologised by Williams in his edited collection.⁵⁷ These include poems such as Claus Bremer's 'Rendering the legible illegible' and Bengt Emil Johnson's 'Homage to John Cage'.

There are parallels between Cage's own application of technologies to the production of sound and innovative uses of electrical equipment in the creation of concrete works (notwithstanding the widely-used 'analogue' machine, the typewriter).⁵⁸ References to Cage in visual textual works reveal the somewhat analogous relationship between his formulations of silence and texts that seek to

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Williams, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*.

⁵⁸ Marjorie Perloff, 'The Music of Verbal Space', *Marjorie Perloff: Modern and Postmodern Poetry and Poetics* [online]. Available from: <http://marjorieperloff.com> [accessed 17 June 2018].

undermine the signifying capabilities of the written word and the capacity for grammar to enable the construction of meaning. Cage himself produced artefacts known as plexigrams. 'Not Wanting to Say Anything About Marcel' was produced by Cage in 1969 in homage of his late friend Marcel Duchamp [see Figure 9].⁵⁹ The piece consists of eight plexiglass panels, upon which text is printed using the archaic method of silk screening (also known as serigraph) as well as the lithograph.⁶⁰ The panels are set on edge within a wooden base such that the transparency of the medium allows the observer to appreciate the superimposition of text.

In 1964, dsh, Benedictine monk as well as artist and poet, published work produced on the typewriter that featured a mixture of angular forms, some of the geometries of the words maintained without obstruction and others overprinted to obscure the individuality of the grapheme.⁶¹ A number of 'typestracts' dating from the early 1960s featured textual superimposition, such as '140464'⁶² and '260764', which were both produced on the Olivetti Lettera 22 typewriter.⁶³ In Williams' *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, dsh informs in a footnote to his work that the term 'typestracts' is a portmanteau consisting 'typewriter' and 'abstract' and was coined by the poet Edwin Morgan.⁶⁴ '140464' features permutations through the letter 'M' in circular and spiral shapes, the latter poem, '260764', is a scrubby overprinting of blocks of text set at oblique angles on the page. Other

⁵⁹ John Cage, 'Not Wanting to Say Anything About Marcel' [online], *The Norton Simon Museum*. Available from: <https://www.nortonsimon.org> [accessed 21 June 2017].

⁶⁰ John Cage, 'Not Wanting to Say'.

⁶¹ Cobbing, *Changing Forms*.

⁶² Dom Sylvester Houédard, (1964a) '140464', *Artsy* [online]. Available from: <https://www.artsy.net> [accessed 21 June 2017].

⁶³ Dom Sylvester Houédard, (1964b) '260764', *Artsy* [online] Available from: <https://www.artsy.net> [accessed 21 June 2017].

⁶⁴ Williams, *Anthology of Concrete Poetry*.

work from dsh in 1964 includes 'George' [see Figure 8], a poem produced by 'overtyping tight grids of letters'.⁶⁵ Cobbing describes how the typewriter offers the poet a method by which to 'measure' the poem with the 'typewriters accurate left/right & up & down movement'.⁶⁶ 'George' from dsh is a useful example where precision of movement across the horizontal and vertical axes allows for the production of shapes with geometrically balanced forms. However, Cobbing goes on to suggest that whilst the poet gains control over precise perpendicular movement with the typewriter, it is this very precision that undermines the poet's ability to 'dance' to the poem's measure.⁶⁷ The axes become restrictive and Cobbing proposes the stencil and the mimeograph as tools conducive to creative freedom.⁶⁸

Cobbing worked out of the United Kingdom beginning in the 1950s and the Canadian concrete poet McCaffery cites Cobbing as an influence upon his own work.⁶⁹ Cobbing's 1966 collection *Eyearun* was published by the Writers Forum as its first folder.⁷⁰ The folder contains his 'first visually orientated concrete' and features a number of overprinted poems and 'typestracts'.⁷¹ Included are 'rectangular imprints' of Cobbing's 1960 poem 'Are Your Children Safe in the Sea?' [see Figure 10] where overprinting subverts 'linearity' and introduces the

⁶⁵ Dom Sylvester Houédard, (1964c) 'George (170664)' [online], *Richard Saltoun*. Available from: <https://www.richardsaltoun.com/artists> [accessed 21 June 2018].

⁶⁶ Cobbing, *Changing Forms*.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Greg Thomas, 'Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland 1962-75: Ian Hamilton Finlay, Edwin Morgan, Dom Sylvester Houédard and Bob Cobbing' (unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of Edinburgh, 2013), p. 64.

⁷⁰ Bob Cobbing, *Eyearun* (London: Writers Forum, 1966).

⁷¹ Thomas, 'Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland', p. 281.

presence of 'illegibility'.⁷² Addressing the role of the duplicator in the production of Cobbing's works at this time, the poet Lawrence Upton recalls that:

In all the unwanted smears, overprints and spillages arising from *Writers Forum* mimeo production, Cobbing saw the makings of some aspects of his art (through collages, offset and changes of context) from the mid 60s to the mid 80s, and on.⁷³

This collection of Cobbing's poems marks a move away from performative sound poems towards texts that emphasise visuality and are probably influenced themselves by the work of Dom Sylvester Houédard in the early 1960s.⁷⁴ The typestracks fuse texts to obliterate semantic signification as a demonstration of 'language's misuse in specific social and political scenarios'.⁷⁵ In the same year, Ian Hamilton Finlay produced the poem-object 'Wave Rock'.⁷⁶ The work was produced on glass and possesses a similar aesthetic to Cage's 'Not Wanting to Say Anything about Marcel'. The words 'wave' and 'rock' are etched into the surface of a piece of glass and the etchings coalesce to produce illegible areas. The composition is representationally iconic as the form acts as a visual analogy of the collision between water and the shoreline. The words coalesce to produce new lexical items such as 'wrack' and areas of partial and complete illegibility.

The term 'dirty' as a modifier of 'concrete' appears sometime around the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is used as a descriptor for poems that obscure, overprint and make illegible but is of disputed origin. Lori Emerson provides a

⁷² Ibid, p. 316.

⁷³ Lawrence Upton, 'Bob Cobbing: and the book as medium; designs for poetry', *Birkbeck: Readings webjournal*. Available from: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk> [accessed 21 June 2018].

⁷⁴ Thomas, 'Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland', p. 281.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 312.

⁷⁶ Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'Wave Rock' [online], *National Galleries Scotland*. Available from: <https://www.nationalgalleries.org> [accessed 23 June 2017].

history of the use of both the terms ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ and concludes, somewhat indefinitely, that:

as far as I have been able to determine the term “dirty concrete” was first used either by the English critic Mike Weaver or the Canadian critic Stephen Scobie... the first written reference appears in a letter Nichol wrote to Nicholas Zurbrugg... in 1970 in which Nichol claims he learned of the term from Stephen Scobie (and Scobie informed me in a recent email that he learned of it from Mike Weaver). The term was likely then put into broader circulation first by way of Bill Bissett’s 1973 “Quebec Bombers”... which, as Jack David describes it, “begins with the phrase ‘dirty concrete poet’ repeated twice...”⁷⁷

Notwithstanding some confusion over the derivation of the terminology, ‘dirty’ has come to describe works such as ‘Carnival’ by McCaffery [see figure 11]. Poems such as ‘Carnival’ (an excerpt from the second panel is presented here and is from 1970-75. The first panel was created between the years 1967-70) have language placed on disparate compositional planes, one snatch of text set obliquely to its counterparts, and oppositional to the linear horizontality of standardised prose (and poetry) texts. The panel bears the architectural hallmarks of the works of such writers as Cobbing and dsh, suggesting a cogency across practitioners working in similar fields concurrently.

As mentioned above, other examples featuring superimposition and illegibility were being produced by writers in Canada at this time, such as ‘Quebec Bombers’ by Bill Bissett [see Figure 12]. The poem obscures linearity with the perpendicular placement of text. Bissett’s attempts to disrupt the process of close

⁷⁷ Lori Emerson, ‘The Origin of the Term ‘Dirty Concrete Poetry’ (en route to digital D.I.Y.) [online], *Talon Books*. Available from: <http://talonbooks.com> [accessed 23 June 2017].

reading derive from a desire to avoid producing an ‘emotionally-laden poetic treatise on political injustice’ in favour of a ‘poetics of disgust’.⁷⁸

In 1970, Waldrop published *Camp Printing*, a collection of overprinted poems that were originally written by James Camp.⁷⁹ This book is the subject of the case study in Chapter Two. Waldrop begins the book with overprints of the same poem in multiplicity, permuting through increasing levels of illegibility [see Figure 13]. The page begins to shimmer with the slight displacement of the superimposed letter, as if the eye were struggling to achieve and maintain focus. In the book’s latter pages, the images become more purposefully delineated with sharp borders. This gives the poems the visual characteristic of artworks due to their suspension in the centre of the page, the text conspicuous in its framing in white space. The last three poems in *Camp Printing* are different again, their forms reminiscent of destructive explosion. In the last poem, the text seems to appear like matter to radiate from a singularity at the centre of the page.

Charles Bernstein’s chapbook *Veil* [see Figure 14] was published by Xexoxial Editions in 1987.⁸⁰ The book contains ‘10 typed fields of solid language’ that coalesce into a shroud defined by both opacity and transparency.⁸¹ The superimposition of this text is palimpsestic and permits the identification of all its constituent text such that reading is not prevented but ‘redirect[ed]’ and ‘discipline[d]’ in its habitual processes.⁸²

⁷⁸ Beaulieu, ‘Text Without Text’, p. 25.

⁷⁹ Rosmarie Waldrop, *Camp Printing*.

⁸⁰ Charles Bernstein, *Veil* (La Farge, WI: Xexoxial Editions, 1987).

⁸¹ Xexoxial Editions, *Charles Bernstein: Veil*. Available from: <https://xexoxial.org> [accessed 15 June 2018].

⁸² Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 53.

In the 1990s, Jeremy Adler produced his *Pythagorean Sonnets*, a number of which are anthologised by Jeff Hilson in *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets*.⁸³ The publication of textually superimposed texts over last two decades is well documented in Victoria Bean and Chris McCabe's anthology *The New Concrete: Visual Poetry in the 21st Century*⁸⁴ and Philip Davenport's *The Dark Would*.⁸⁵ *The New Concrete* contains works that range from new poems by long-established figures such as Augusto de Campos to contemporary works by writers as diverse as Jen Bervin, Sean Bonney and Derek Beaulieu. Similarly, to dsh, Cobbing and McCaffery, the poets collected in *The New Concrete* take advantage of the technologies available to them in the production of their poems. In this respect, these anthologies provide in their pages several texts that demonstrate not only developments in poetics but also in the technological tools used to produce the works. Poets and artists do not always conform to these longitudinal developments but instead choose the appropriate tool for the job regardless of what is most current and available. For example, Cobbing experimented with the pressing of individual letters onto the page in collections such as *The Five Vowels* (1974) when that technology had been long usurped by more technologically advanced examples.⁸⁶ There is no doubt that the accessibility of digital text and the commodification of technologies designed to manipulate and print language have provided writers with the facility and capability to produce and share their works with relative ease. For example, engagement with digital processes occurs

⁸³ Jeff Hilson (ed.) *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* (Hastings: Reality Street, 2008), pp. 150-151.

⁸⁴ Chris McCabe & Victoria Bean, *The New Concrete: Visual Poetry in the 21st Century* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2015).

⁸⁵ Philip Davenport, *The Dark Would* (London: Apple Pie Editions, 2013).

⁸⁶ Bob Cobbing, *The Five Vowels* (London: Writers Forum, 1974).

most obviously via dissemination on the Internet as the historical ‘restrictions of the publishing industry’ can be circumvented.⁸⁷

However, and somewhat surprisingly, those contemporary works that feature textual superimposition and/or illegibility tend to adopt relatively basic printing techniques and analogue processes such as handmade collages and further experimentations with the typewriter. Whilst the electronic and digital age has facilitated the production of work with a lack of difficulty, it seems that the fetishisation of the analogue has persisted. This is apparent with even the most modest of surveys of *The New Concrete* and *The Dark Would*. The restoration of less advanced modes of production appears somewhat erroneous in the context of Goldsmith’s proclamation in the introductory chapter to *The New Concrete* where he states:

[concrete poetry] found a new and unexpected role in the digital world.... In Photoshop, every time we work with text – stretching and sizing it – we are treating language materially. The Internet itself is entirely made up of alphanumeric language, the identical material that was used to make classic concrete poetry.⁸⁸

Goldsmith’s suggestion that the material treatment of language by the concrete poets of the 1950s to the 1970s was prescient of developments of the use of language in the digital age seems to neglect the analogue processes used by other practitioners globally and those still being used today by contemporary writers. He does suggest that ‘Concrete Poetry in the twenty-first century always winks at its twentieth-century precursors’, but it may be argued that the proposed

⁸⁷ Ian Davidson, *Ideas of Space in contemporary Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 164.

⁸⁸ Kenneth Goldsmith, ‘Make It New: Post-Digital Concrete Poetry in the 21st Century’, in Chris McCabe and Victoria Bean (eds.) *The New Concrete: Visual Poetry in the 21st Century* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2015), p. 14.

fleeting nature of this engagement does not succinctly capture the procedural parallels and consistencies that pervade the decades in question. Marco Gioveanle's 'sibyl 161329', for example, consists of a rather simplistic binary of the printed page upon which 'trivial notes, quotes... [and] fragments' have been written in thick black pen.⁸⁹ 'Written Over Again' by Alec Finlay with Ray DiPalma features the titular phrase written twice, one over the other, in the centre of a white page, the materials used a piece of paper and the pencil.⁹⁰ The work of both Sean Bonney and Nick Thurston bear the hallmarks of the typewritten page and 'Haiku #84' by Scott Helmes consists of torn pieces of a printed page placed in purposeful collagic composition.⁹¹ What becomes apparent is not the contemporary writer's predisposition for the electronic and technologically advanced but a nuanced inclination towards a procedural amalgam where the digital and the analogue combine in the historic spirit of the 'mixed-media' poet. These tensions are evidenced by the creative works in Volume Two, composed as they are from a mixture of electronic and analogue materials and processes.

Indicative of this type of work, where rudimentary production techniques are applied in the contemporary context, are the palimpsests of Howe. Although an innovator with the written word throughout her career, it is Howe's work in the 2017 collection *Debths*, which is the subject of the case study in Chapter Three, that best evidences the combination of print technologies with the unmistakable signature of the handcrafted text. Juxtaposed with centrally-

⁸⁹ Marco Gioveanle, 'sibyl 161329', in Chris McCabe and Victoria Bean (eds.) *The New Concrete: Visual Poetry in the 21st Century* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2015), p. 104.

⁹⁰ Alec Finlay with Ray DiPalma, 'Written Over Again', in Chris McCabe and Victoria Bean (eds.) *The New Concrete: Visual Poetry in the 21st Century* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2015), p. 89.

⁹¹ Scott Helmes, 'Haiku #84', in Chris McCabe and Victoria Bean (eds.) *The New Concrete: Visual Poetry in the 21st Century* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2015), p. 109.

aligned lyric poems in alternating sequence, the collection sees overprinting and overlaying of text that resurrects the lost voice and seeks to restore it to inspirited political autonomy. The poems play with power, particularly archival primacy, undermining hierarchical structure and using illegibility as a material indicator of the consequences of 'personal and cultural violence'.⁹² Published in the same year, Walker's *Condensations* submits language to typographical compaction, nucleating appropriated texts to create 'slow-collage-word-terrains' as a score for performance.⁹³ His poems are visually analogous with the aforementioned *Veil* from Bernstein, and these similarities are discussed further in the first case study in Chapter One.⁹⁴

Despite Howe and Walker's poetic forms necessitating the physical rotation and handling of the pages by the reader, the works remain static (as we might expect) in the printed book.⁹⁵ The work of Caroline Bergvall, however, manipulates the capacity for movement provided by filmic presentations of literature. Her project *Drift* presents a performative triptych consisting the vocalisation of the written text and visually treated language transmitted on screen with a percussive backing track.⁹⁶ Similarly to Howe's work in *Debths*, an appraisal of Bergvall's book release of *Drift* (2014) reveals that the writer engages with language as a political instrument.⁹⁷ The author appropriates the text of discursive human rights reports and collages it with references to popular

⁹² Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 38.

⁹³ Nathan Walker, *Condensations*.

⁹⁴ Bernstein, *Veil*.

⁹⁵ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 38.

⁹⁶ *Penned in the Margins*, 'Drift' [online], *Productions*. Available from: <http://www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk> [accessed 21 June 2018].

⁹⁷ Caroline Bergvall, *Drift* (New York, NY: Nightboat books, 2014).

culture and historic English and Nordic Poetry.⁹⁸ On the screen, the materiality of the work sees the signifying capacity of the written word 'drift' into and out of the realm of its linguistic utilitarian function. At the same time, the filmic movement of the text creates a mass of superimpositions that shift the language into and out of illegibility.

The brief account provided here reveals the diverse mediums with which textually superimposed and illegible texts works can be produced, transmitted and performed. What they all share is the 'material' that they use to produce their work: the written word, and the desire to place one letter, word or larger syntactic structure over another such that their forms intermingle and, as a result, become partly or wholly illegible. The next chapter addresses the difficulty with works that emphasise the duality of the word, placing its function as a transparent signifier and its material aspects, the visual forms it takes, in equity. How can we continue to read these works when their composition challenges normative reading modes?

⁹⁸ *Penned in the Margins*, 'Drift'.



Figure 1. The Archimedes Palimpsest (c1300)

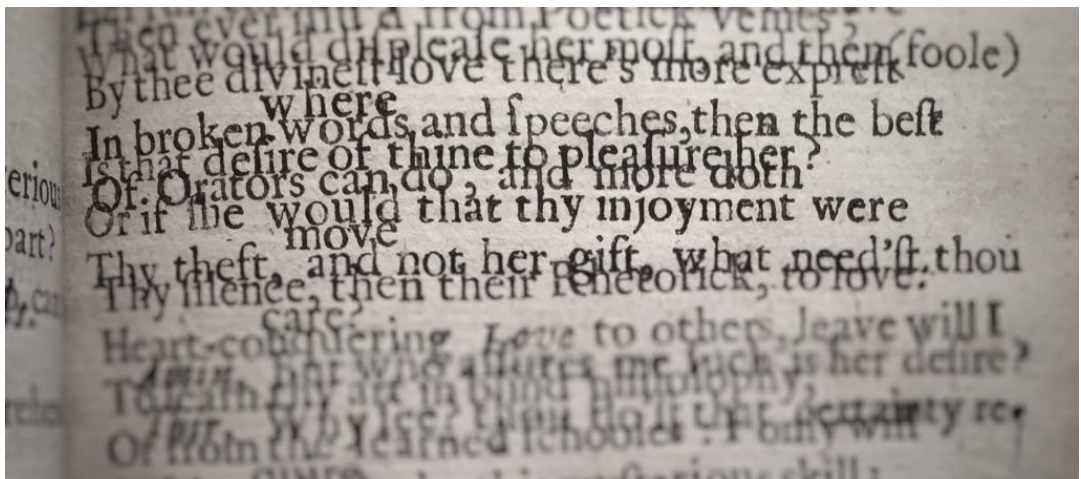


Figure 2. Torquato Tasso, excerpt from *Aminta: The Famous Pastoral*, trans. by John Dancer (1660)



Figure 3. F. T. Marinetti, 'After the Marne, Joffre Visited the Front by Automobile' (1919)



Figure 4. Pablo Picasso, 'La Bouteille de Suze' (1912)



Figure 5. Theo van Doesburg & Kurt Schwitters, 'Kleine Dada Soiree' (1922)



Figure 6. Pablo Picasso, 'In-text Plate (Colophon)' (1949)

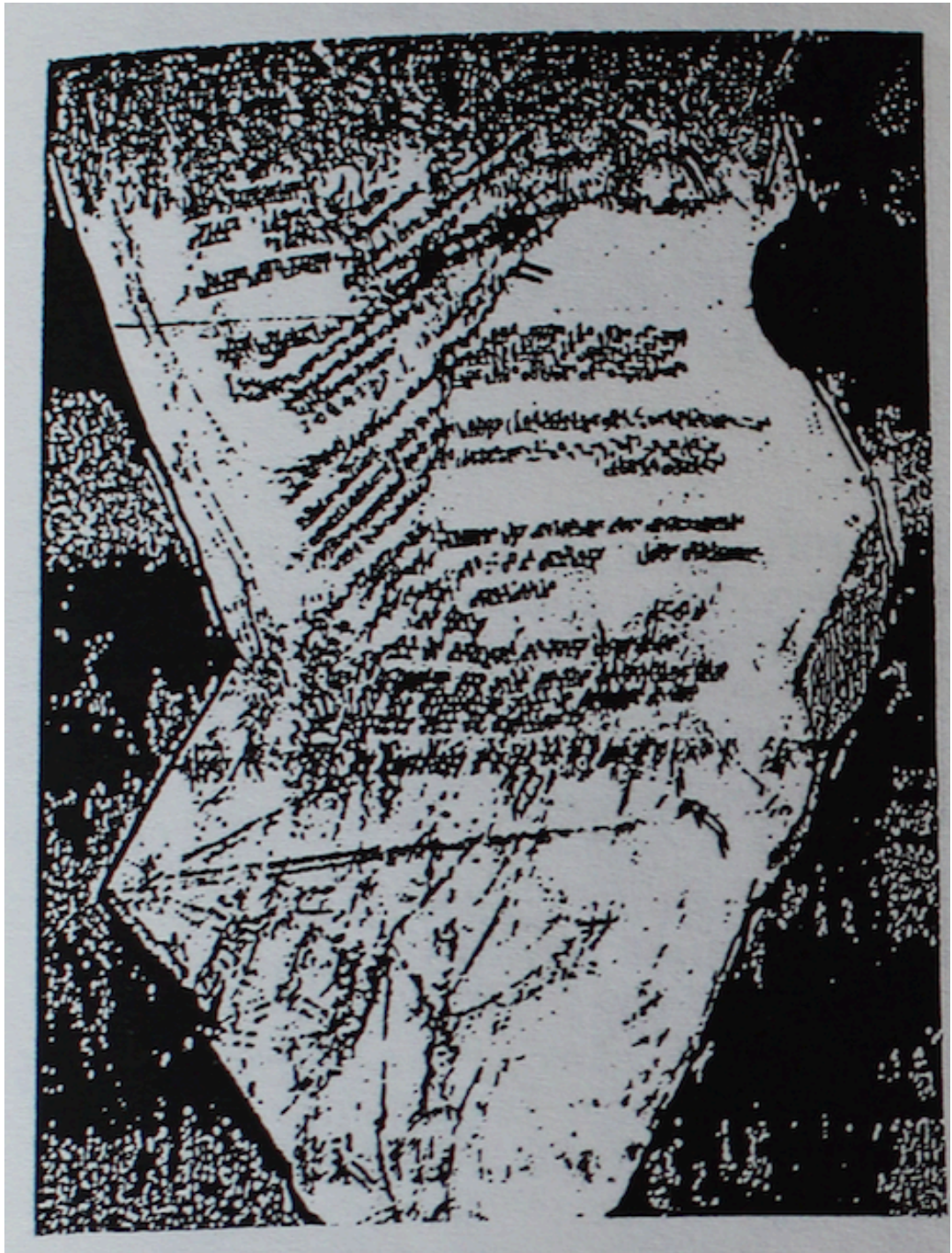


Figure 7. Bob Cobbing, 'Stencil of the Announcement of The Destruction in Art Symposium' (1966)

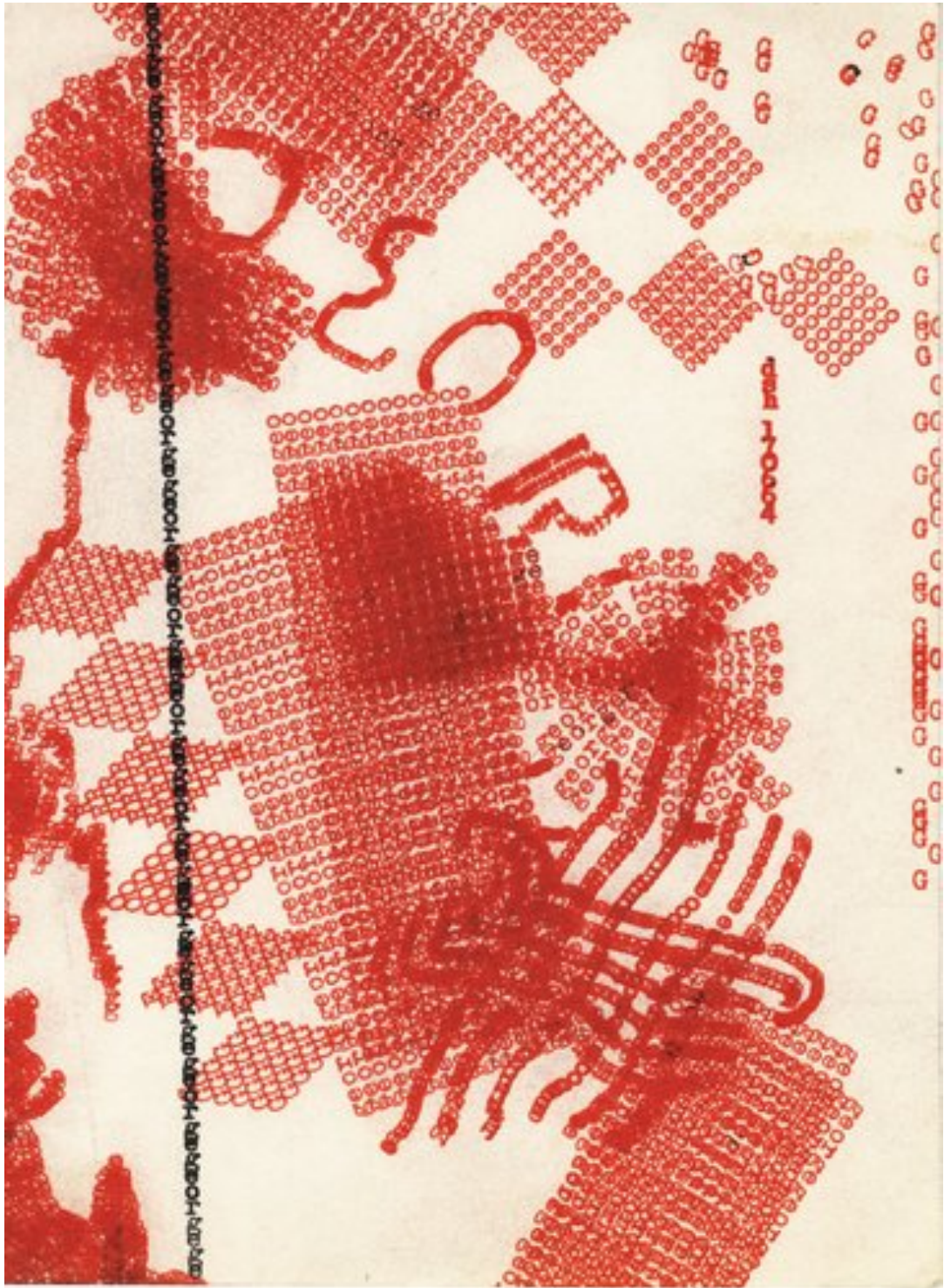


Figure 8: Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'George' (1964)

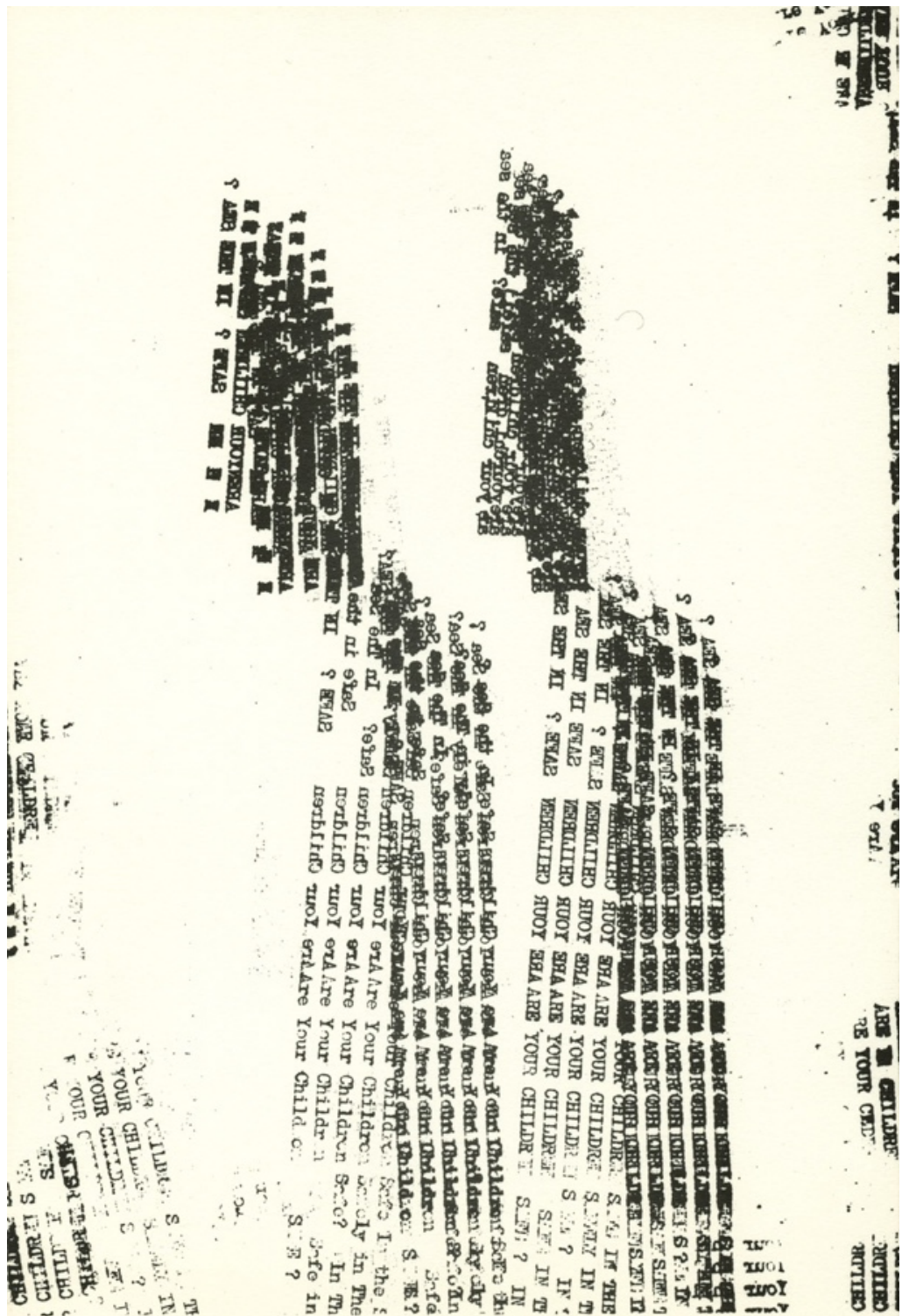


Figure 10. Bob Cobbing, 'Are Your Children Safe in the Sea?' (1966)

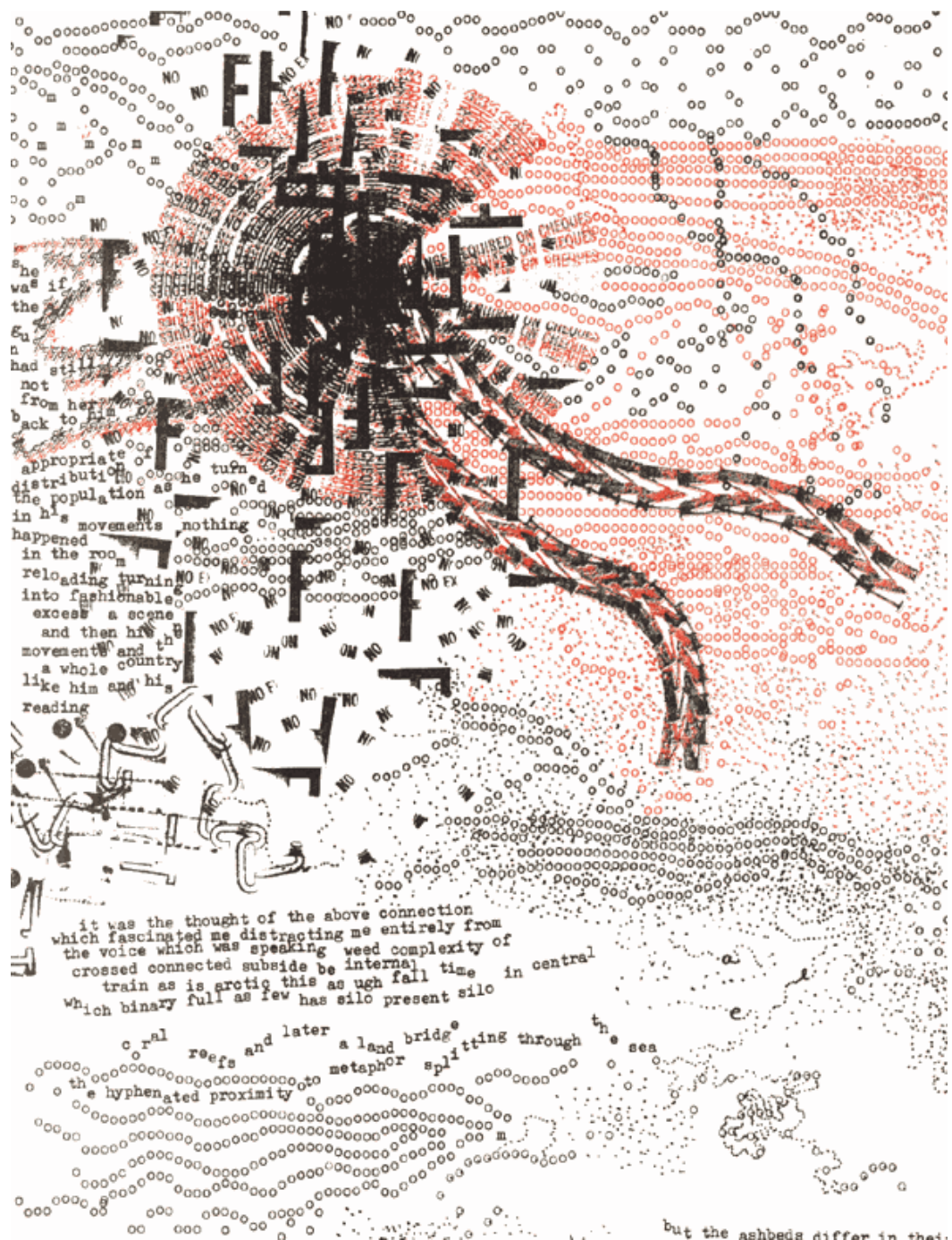


Figure 11. Steve McCaffery, 'Carnival: The Second Panel' (1970-75)

CHAPTER ONE: READING TEXTUAL SUPERIMPOSITION IN NATHAN WALKER'S *CONDENSATIONS*

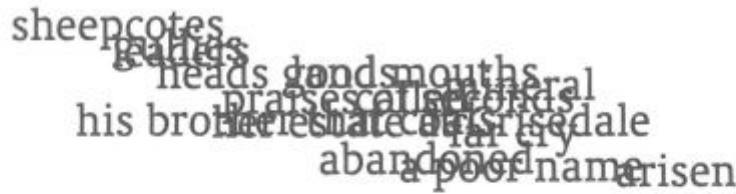


Figure 15: Nathan Walker, extract from 'Says', *Condensations*, p. 22.

Textual Superimposition and the Problem of 'Naturalisation'

Veronica Forrest-Thomson describes the process by which the reader constructs intelligibility from the poetic text as 'naturalisation'.¹ Naturalisation is, as Forrest-Thomson explains in *Poetic Artifice*, the attempt by the reader to 'reduce the strangeness of poetic language and poetic organisation by making it intelligible'.² Naturalisation is, Alison Mark states, 'not only irresistible... [but] clearly necessary to any critical account of poetry'.³ Forrest-Thomson continues to provide a theorisation of 'intelligibility' and the role it plays in the subsequent production of a 'thematic synthesis', where the reader rationalises 'details, making them natural and intelligible in the process of interpretation'.⁴ The

¹ Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2016), p. 36.

² Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 36.

³ Alison Mark, *Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Language Poetry* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2001), p. 6.

⁴ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 36.

production of a thematic synthesis is itself arrived at via a process described as the 'image-complex', a method whereby the reader navigates and aligns a poem's levels in order to make it cohere.⁵ A motive for producing such readerly procedures is cited by Forrest-Thomson as an antidote to the predisposition of the reader to seek a naturalisation in haste; her *Poetic Artifice* endeavours to achieve an alternative, more deliberate and measured reading strategy.⁶ A considered and careful approach to the reading of poems, Forrest-Thomson argues, allows for a 'good naturalisation', as the reader appends an arrival at a concluding 'thematic synthesis' in favour of an analytical reading of the poem.

Forrest-Thomson's analysis of naturalisation delineates the process into the following dichotomy: 'good naturalisation' and 'bad naturalisation'. 'Bad naturalisation' occurs when the reader seeks to:

purchase intelligibility at the cost of blindness: blindness to the complexity of... non-meaningful features which differentiate poetry from everyday language and make it something other than an external thematic statement about an already-known world.⁷

This method, that of 'external expansion and limitation', burdens the poem with meaning that is sought externally, and is preventative of the potential for the text itself to propagate meaning. Premature imposition of exterior forces upon the text is antithetical to Forrest-Thomson's brand of literary criticism and theory that prioritises 'process: how meaning is constructed, rather than what the poem means'.⁸ Mark explains that Forrest-Thomson's partiality for 'form' has its source

⁵ Ibid, p. 39.

⁶ Ibid, p. 36.

⁷ Ibid, p. 36.

⁸ Mark, *Veronica-Forrest Thomson and Language Poetry*, p. 4.

in formalist approaches to literary criticism adopted by, for example, William Empson, whom she greatly respected.⁹ Poet and critic Robert Sheppard provides an example of a 'bad reading' when he describes the introduction by the reader of an external context, societal fragmentation, upon the structural characteristics of a poem written in free verse.¹⁰ The argument being that the very lack of metre or rhyme in a poem infers that its meaning relates to macro issues pertaining to social decay, disruptive modernity etc. Consequently, the processes and techniques present in the poem are minimalized by the imposition of a semantics exterior to its composition.

On the other hand, a 'good naturalisation' occurs when the poem is approached on its own terms and without presupposed propositions as to its meaning. During this process the reader:

dwells on the non-meaningful levels of poetic language, such as phonetic and prosodic patterns and spatial organisation, and tries to state their relation to other levels of organisation rather than set them aside in an attempt to produce a statement about the world.¹¹

For a good naturalisation, the critical appraisal of the poem commences from a different position, foregrounding the poet's application of non-meaningful elements in the work to hypothesise about a possible thematic synthesis. Forrest-Thomson's emphasis on the structure and process of the poem's making discloses her predisposition for a formalist approach to criticism of the literary text. It is from the premise of a formal appreciation of the poem that semantic

⁹ Ibid, p. 4.

¹⁰ Robert Sheppard, 'Robert Sheppard: Response to Veronica Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice* back in print at last' (2016a), *Pages* [online]. Available from: <http://robertsheppard.blogspot.com> [accessed 23 March 2017].

¹¹ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 36.

propositions can be made; a process Forrest-Thomson calls 'internal limitation and expansion'.¹² The word 'dwells' in the above quotation is conspicuous, highlighting the importance of slow and active reading towards a 'good naturalisation'. The effect of textual superimposition in Walker's *Condensations* is to obstruct the reading process and as such slow down the process of naturalisation in a manner similar to that advocated by Forrest-Thomson.

The adjectival modifiers 'good and 'bad' make explicit the value Forrest-Thomson places on the two modes of reading. Whilst this chapter makes use of the Forrest-Thomson's good naturalisation process, Sheppard reminds us that, in the act of reading, 'Naturalisation – both good and bad – constructs intelligibility by reaching out to the non-verbal, and is inevitable'.¹³ As such, I do not make value judgements on the two approaches and choose one over the other only due to its usefulness for this argument. For example, an appraisal of the poems in Walker's *Condensations* reveals that a normative reading that provides the ability to make 'intelligible' the words on the page is not possible. Where the normative is precluded, an analysis of the Walker text via Forrest-Thomson's *modus operandi* of good naturalisation, which places the emphasis on the form of the work, is more appropriate and likely to yield more advantageous results.

The process of naturalisation is the attempt by a reader to make poetic artifice intelligible, to move from the poetic text towards a statement about the extra-lingual world. Forrest-Thomson's indicative diagram in *Poetic Artifice* is the most practical example of an analytic scheme of manoeuvre for the reader seeking to

¹² Ibid, p. 38.

¹³ Sheppard, 'Response to Veronica Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice*.

naturalise poetic language.¹⁴ Whilst other scholars, such as Culler¹⁵ and Yury Lotman¹⁶, have also prioritised levelness and formal sensitivity in their analytic approaches, it is Forrest-Thomson that provides the most coherent and workable process by which to approach a critical analysis of the poetic text. The schematic is reproduced below in Figure 16:

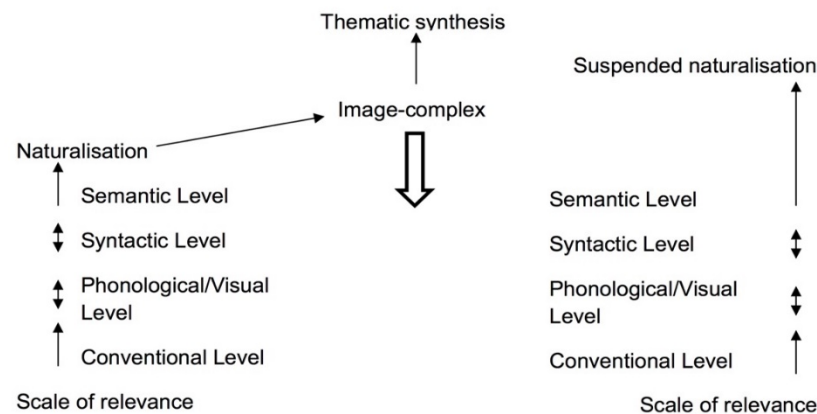


Figure 16. Forrest-Thomson's Schematic for Naturalisation

Forrest-Thomson's schema was intended for use with legible poetic works, the readability of the text premising the negotiation by the reader of its various constituent levels. The poems that constitute *Condensations* are characterised by the transformation of the grapheme from a state of legibility to illegibility via overprinting; a process I call textual superimposition.¹⁷ Walker's poems prioritise spatial placement and materiality over traditional elements of poetic craft: alliteration, enjambment, the image, defamiliarisation etc., features that rely upon legibility as the foundation of their identification and critique. This

¹⁴ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 39.

¹⁵ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 164.

¹⁶ Yury Lotman, *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, trans. by D. Barton Johnson (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1974), p. 40.

¹⁷ Walker, *Condensations*, p. 6.

chapter provides an analysis of the limitations of Forrest-Thomson's approach, and of reading more generally, when applied to works such as *Condensations*. Further to this, I seek to propose augmentations to the schema in order to postulate an analytic method of naturalisation that is suitable when reading poems that feature textual superimposition and consequent areas of illegibility. I will adopt particular parts of Forrest-Thomson's critical nomenclature where they are useful, but I do not adopt her approach wholesale.

Forrest-Thomson lays out her methodology by which to naturalise poetic texts in *Poetic Artifice* and provides examples of its application to several poems. This includes Shakespeare's 94th sonnet 'They that have power to hurt and will do none'.¹⁸ Forrest-Thomson's choice of poem seems motivated by a desire to provide a parallel analysis to that of Empson, who delivered his own evaluation of Sonnet 94 in *Some Versions of Pastoral* in 1966.¹⁹ Whilst supportive of Empson's final analysis, Forrest-Thomson describes his approach as a 'bad naturalisation' characterised as 'a good reading which is reached by the wrong roads and supported by the wrong reasons'.²⁰ Mark writes that Empson's critique finds its foundation in a methodology antithetical to procedures that place concentration on 'structure and systems of relations', choosing instead to 'focus on interpretation'.²¹ Culler writes:

the urge to assimilate [the] power and permanence or to let... formal organisation work upon us requires us to make literature into a communication, to reduce its strangeness, and to draw upon supplementary conventions which enable it, as we say, to speak to us.²²

¹⁸ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 41.

¹⁹ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935), p.89.

²⁰ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 42.

²¹ Mark, *Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Language Poetry*, p. 68.

²² Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 163.

The primal urge experienced by the reader is to make the poem intelligible. It is manifest in Walker's collection that textual superimposition, when engaged as a structural device, creates illegible language in parts of the text as a preclusion to the perception of those formal characteristics that premise the process of naturalisation. The consequences of this for naturalisation are potentially disastrous. Sheppard writes that an 'unintelligible poetry would be... meaningless', which is a possible consequence for the illegible text that resists naturalisation.²³ How then is it that the reader engages with Walker's text and 'constructs intelligibility'?²⁴ Forrest-Thomson's critical process relies upon the identification of known graphemes. These allow the reader to discern their relation to other graphemes in the sign system. Where the text is overprinted, it is impossible to affect assimilation and, to adopt Culler's phraseology, 'make literature into a communication'.²⁵ Forrest-Thomson describes the process by which poetic language is made 'communication' as the 'thematic synthesis', the point at which the reader has navigated and aligned the poem's levels to make it cohere.²⁶

Forrest-Thomson does not avoid the difficulty encountered when seeking to naturalise parts of the poem that resist intelligibility. She seeks to overcome the problem of non-conformity by suggesting that some elements of a poem may be considered 'irrelevant' to the reader as they seek to naturalise a work and

²³ Robert Sheppard, *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016b), p. 31.

²⁴ Sheppard, *The Meaning of Form*, p. 31.

²⁵ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 163.

²⁶ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 39.

attain a thematic synthesis. Forrest-Thomson provides the term 'suspended naturalisation' to describe the process by which the reader identifies the irrelevant elements of a poem and brands them meaningless in the context of a naturalisation.²⁷ However, there is some difficulty here and Forrest-Thomson seems to acknowledge this when she states that the 'irrelevant' status of the 'various types of pattern' which do not benefit the reader are still useful as observatory modes of 'interaction and mutual enforcement'.²⁸ For Forrest-Thomson, whilst not relevant to the naturalisation of the poem at large, those 'irrelevant' aspects of the work can possess interest in and of themselves. For example, the reader may approach Walker's poems thus: the legible areas are 'relevant' as they allow for a naturalisation and are therefore considered a part of formulating a 'thematic synthesis'; the illegible areas are 'irrelevant' as they resist naturalisation and therefore consist a suspended naturalisation.

However, the compartmentalisation of superimposed text as irrelevant to the production of meaning in *Condensations* is difficult to support due to its procedural, constructive and formal centrality. Therefore, to take Forrest-Thomson's approach wholesale and apply it to Walker's *Condensations*, is to burden oneself with unhelpful critical restrictions. It is here then that I depart from her model to consider augmentations to the schema in order to broaden its practical application in this study.

It is necessary at this juncture to discuss the nature of the word 'relevance'. Forrest-Thomson places the terms 'scale of relevance' and 'scale of irrelevance'

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 38.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 38.

at the bottom of her schematic design.²⁹ This infers that all acts undertaken during the process of naturalisation are premised upon the delineation of poetic elements into one of these two groups. This is important in the context of the Walker poems as textual superimposition enacts illegibility and interrupts the process of naturalisation, which, as discussed above, infers that the illegible text is irrelevant.

However, I argue that the reader cannot define any part of a poem's making in terms of its relevance. Relevance is a concept situated in the shadow of subjectivity and this is confirmed by study of definitions of the word, which compound its elusive nature. The Oxford English Dictionary suggests that 'relevance' refers to a subject that has either a 'connection with... [the] point at issue [or a] relation *to* the matter in hand' – note that the italicised emphasis on 'to' comes from the OED itself – or 'pertinence to current or important issues'.³⁰ The difficulty here is that one reader may find an element of the poem 'relevant' whilst another reader finds the same element 'irrelevant'. Additionally, the same reader may find different elements relevant during different readings. This puts into question the role of those parts of the poem that are suspended. If an element is suspended it does not contribute to 'a thematic synthesis in terms of the external world' and is therefore meaningless in the context of the reading at large.³¹ However, as two different readers may assign relevance and irrelevance to different parts of the poem infers that there are no meaningless elements to be found during an analysis.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 39.

³⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary* [online], 'Relevance'. Available from: <https://www.oed.com/> [accessed 1 February 2017].

³¹ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 38.

A useful interpretation is provided by Mark, who seems to conflate the modifiers 'good' and 'suspended' in the context of the process of naturalisation. The schematic diagram provided by Forrest-Thomson suggests that good naturalisation and suspended naturalisation are distinct. Suspended naturalisation sits subordinate to good naturalisation, as the reader demarcates parts of a poem as irrelevant (and therefore suspended) during the process of a good naturalisation of the text.³² However, during a discussion of Forrest-Thomson's theory of naturalisation, Mark suggests the terms are synonymous when she says:

What she calls 'good' or 'suspended' naturalisation simultaneously relies on the connective powers of the reader and on his or her patience in their exercise.³³

The word 'or' is used as a conjunction to action an association between two synonymous terms. 'Suspended' naturalisation is not subordinated but placed as equivalent to 'good' naturalisation. The terminology is further confused by Mark's claim that Forrest-Thomson suggests that the process of naturalisation itself should be 'suspended' in order that an absolute reading of the poem may take place. It seems that suspended naturalisation is not only a consequence of the process of good naturalisation, but also a precursor to good naturalisation itself.

Also, is the reader not inclined to assign the label of irrelevance to parts of the poetic work that do not assist in the formulation of a cogent thematic synthesis? Sheppard addresses this difficulty and expands upon the

³² *Ibid*, p. 39.

³³ Mark, *Language Poetry*, p. 6.

consequences of assigning the quality of irrelevancy to several the formal aspects of the poem:

Are we not left with the problem her theory is attempting to address and redress: an apprehension of theme on one hand (though this has its supporting artifice) and a bundle of devices on the other that we cannot make behave within a decorous interpretation and thus discount or read as pure decoration?³⁴

If irrelevancy is ascribed to a part of the poem, it is due to a discordance between a projected thematic synthesis and a device acting as a barrier to that interpretation. If so, Forrest-Thomson's schematisation, good naturalisation via the emphasis on 'internal expansion and limitation', does not differ from a bad naturalisation via 'external expansion and limitation'.³⁵ The insertion of exteriors to the work occurs at a different point – during the analysis rather than before – but appears all the same. This weakness in the critical thrust of Forrest-Thomson's schema has been identified before. For example, other scholars have challenged, either directly or indirectly, Forrest-Thomson's claim that the poem contains 'non-meaningful' elements. Lotman, for example, delineates the poetic text from the prose text via the differentiating feature of meaningfulness of the 'plane of expression'.³⁶ The plane of expression in prose is insignificant as long as it enables the transmission of information to a receiver. In poetry, the plane of expression is characterised as a relationship between disruptions in the organisation of language – transgressions of a syntactic nature, for example – and the perception of those disruptions by the receiver. In essence, Lotman provides

³⁴ Sheppard, *The Meaning of Form*, p. 35.

³⁵ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 37.

³⁶ Lotman, *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, p. 40.

a useful explanation of the function of poetic artifice: the elevation of the text via the application of what Forrest-Thomson herself calls 'distinctive yet elusive features'.³⁷ The consequence, Lotman explains, is that 'poetry is a complexly constructed meaning [where] all of its elements are semantic elements'.³⁸ The assignation of irrelevance to a device present in the poem is antithetical to the proposition that 'meaning' is premised upon 'a complex system of correlations, comparisons, and contrasts impossible in an ordinary language construct'.³⁹

Given that Forrest-Thomson's book begins on the first page with an elevation of the poetic text over the prose text, the ease with which she can reject some formal elements of the poem is curious and antithetical to the analysis of *Condensations* undertaken in these pages.⁴⁰ The designation of those elements as present but thematically inconsequential parallels Lotman's definition of the plane of expression for the prose text, where artifice is effaced in order to enable a utilitarian linguistic function. Lotman's account is useful in its refusal to prioritise some formal features over others, and in the converse designation of 'all levels of language' in the poetic text as meaningful. In the context of Walker's poems in *Condensations*, Lotman's position entitles the illegible text the same importance as the legible in its designation of meaningfulness to all the poem's elements.

Bernstein provides a more direct critique of Forrest-Thomson in the essay 'Artifice of Absorption'.⁴¹ Similarly to both Lotman and Forrest-Thomson,

³⁷ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 33.

³⁸ Lotman, *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, p. 35.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 33.

⁴⁰ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 33.

⁴¹ Charles Bernstein, 'Artifice of Absorption', *Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 9.

Bernstein accepts that the 'artificiality of a poem... is necessarily part of the 'poetic' reading' of the given text.⁴² It is the foregrounding of the formal character of the text that reveals it as artificial. Where Bernstein diverges from Forrest-Thomson's account is at the point of designation as 'non-semantic' those features of the poem that are 'extra-lexical'.⁴³ Bernstein offers the example of sonic devices and their use in a poetic construct when he proposes that there is 'no fixed threshold' at which the sound becomes meaningful.⁴⁴ Bernstein's argument seems cogent and effective: how could the reader set this threshold? And how could such a prescriptive margin be applied to different poetic texts written via different modes?

However, Bernstein continues to offer a more convincing argument against Forrest-Thomson's designation of some elements of the poetic work as meaningless in the context of a naturalisation. He suggests that we should not only consider those levels of a poem to which we can ascribe a 'relatively fixed connotative or denotative meaning' as semantically active strata.⁴⁵ That is to say that poetic meaning is not regulatory in the sense that it can be assigned in absoluteness to that which is not extra-lexical, or to use my own term, extra-linguistic. This is the point of theoretical divergence: Forrest-Thomson adopts a formalism that regulates naturalisation via the parameters set solely by the text; Bernstein accepts that there are forces exterior to the text operating upon it during the process of naturalisation, and that these may affect a reading. The

⁴² Bernstein, 'Artifice of Absorption', p. 12.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 12.

chapter now moves to critical readings of *Condensations* and attempts to naturalise the illegible as well as the legible.

I begin by providing two naturalisations according to Forrest-Thomson's schema in Figure 16. The first is a 'bad naturalisation' and the second a 'good naturalisation'. I have chosen a section of the poem 'Says' from *Condensations*.⁴⁶ The example is typical of the collection in that the poem features both legible and illegible sections in the same page space. The poem has been scanned into the document to maintain its formal integrity:

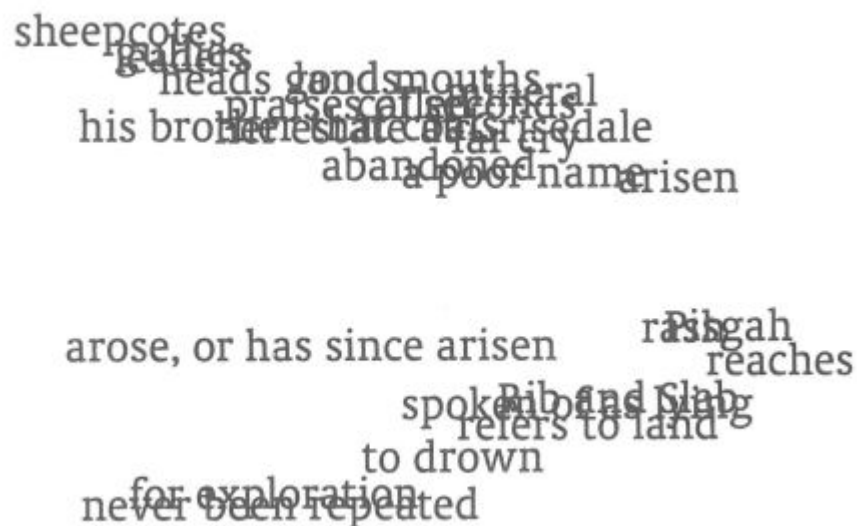


Figure 17: Nathan Walker, extract from 'Says', *Condensations*, p. 22.

I start with 'bad naturalisation'. Due to the radical form of the poem – the presence of textual superimposition and illegibility – I concentrate initially on those parts of the poem that are textually superimposed. Upon opening the book and appraising its pages, it is obvious that the text is a series of poems, or, at least,

⁴⁶ Walker, *Condensations*, p. 22.

poem-objects. Textual placement occurs sporadically, the page traversed in a mode contradictory to our recognition of, say, the linear placement of language apparent in prose. Delineation from prose is proposed as a marker of poetic convention by Ian Davidson, who explains, perhaps too pragmatically, 'We know a poem is a poem... because it looks like one'.⁴⁷ Whilst this may be true of the English sonnet or the limerick, which have characteristics that make them easily recognisable on the page (Forrest-Thomson describes this as the 'conventional level'), it is not necessarily true in the case of 'Says'. Textual superimposition forefronts the materiality of language in a manner similar to the layering of oil-based paints in an artwork. The casual reader may not, therefore, assign to the text 'Says' the descriptor of 'poem' as the work employs devices that are alien to them in the context of reading poems.

Approaching the excerpt critically, however, we can appreciate that it is made of language and that is in English, and that we can read some parts of that language and not others. This is peculiar, perhaps consideration of the title of the poem might reveal it as indicative of themes or motifs explored therein. The title of the poem is 'Says'. This relates to language, both phoneme and grapheme, but to the text in question also.

However, the poem both 'says' and does not 'say' in the traditional sense. The words are legible in areas and illegible in others. In the context of the title of the poem we can propose that the text addresses the fallibility of language, the characteristic it possesses of being imperfect or inadequate; language is ultimately manufactured and subject to imperfection. Additionally, the textual

⁴⁷ Davidson, *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry*, p. 125.

superimposition, we might propose, infers destruction and therefore a level of force, perhaps indicative of the monopolisation of language by those that seek to weaponise it.

Additionally, textual superimposition suggests a state of linguistic multiplicity that converges to non-sense, such as that evident in the polylogue created by multiple outputs in the mass media. McLuhan & McLuhan describe the process of engaging with and negotiating the language emitted from multiple outlets of such media as an abdication of physical reality in favour of a state of 'disembodied intelligence'.⁴⁸ The overprinting, then, may be a textual representation of the subservience of the human mind to the abstraction of social and mass medias. We may propose an exploration of several further social commentaries: societal power dynamics or the hierarchical class system persistent in British culture, for example.

If we consider those snatches of text that are legible, we read 'sheep' 'arose' 'arisen' 'drown'. These are, in places, archaic and therefore low frequency words. Also, the word 'sheep' infers the pastoral and the spiritual, which complements a building religious nomenclature in the Christian tradition. This is further compounded by the word 'drown', itself a possible inference of biblical covenant and destruction, as described in the Noah story of the Book of Genesis.⁴⁹ To extend the meaning, we could cite the story of the Tower of Babel, the linguistic origin for the disparate nature of languages across the globe. A text subjected to superimposition could therefore be emblematic of the difficult nature of communication across different continents, between people who speak

⁴⁸ Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 72.

⁴⁹ Genesis 7. 1-24.

different languages. Finally, the overprinting might also infer intertextuality, the literal blending of texts on the page an evocation of the relationship between all texts.

The above analysis has produced a thematic synthesis of sorts. However, in the process of constructing intelligibility, a process of external expansion and limitation has occurred, the premising mode of analysis ascribed to 'bad' naturalisation. Form has, to use Forrest-Thomson's terminology, been made subservient to extended meaning.⁵⁰ The result is a reading of the poem akin to the recognition of one's own face in a mirror: a reflection of an object that the reader already knows and understands. I have not talked specifically about structure, language use, poetic craft, artifice, but instead transposed a knowledge exterior to the poem onto its form and legible content to make the poem cohere. This is a rigorous and exacting antithesis of Forrest-Thomson's 'good' approach to textual analysis, which takes as its starting point the form of the text itself.

'Good naturalisation' is a course of examination that considers the constituent levels of the poem. The process is a concentrated synthesis of critique upon 'non-meaningful levels of poetic language' in order to make the poem cohere.⁵¹ In this sense, the means by which the poem is made to cohere are contained within the poem itself, precluding the need of the reader to inject notions into the text from external sources. Indeed, external expansion is only permitted within the parameters that the artifice allows.⁵² When approaching the analysis in this manner, we are performing a critical act based in Formalism. Difficulties with this

⁵⁰ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 36.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 36.

⁵² Sheppard, *Meaning of Form*, p. 31.

have already been addressed and are discussed further below, but we must for now proceed considering Sheppard's helpful approximation of Forrest-Thomson's 'good naturalisation', 'If this is formalism, it is formalism that produces its own content'.⁵³

The process of internal expansion and limitation is dependent upon the intelligibility of the poem's constituent devices. For example, we are not able to base our conclusions – make the poem intelligible – on propositions pertaining to the sonic features of a line if that line is, in part or in completion, illegible. This seems obvious to say if we look to Forrest-Thomson's naturalisation of Shakespeare's 94th sonnet; thematic synthesis is in part attained via an examination of the distribution of the long /o/ sound in the first quatrain.⁵⁴

As evidenced in the taxonomy provided in the introductory chapter, numerous innovative works feature textual superimposition and we must seek to augment our critical strategy so as to allow for a satisfactory account of the modes of their artifice. This is not possible if we rely exclusively on the intelligibility of internal features of the text as the source of our evidence. Forrest-Thomson's schema does move away from a purely linguistic analysis to allow for a consideration of not only the phonological and syntactic characteristics of a given line, but also the artificial function of that line in the poetic context. This shift is undoubtedly useful and provides a necessary and practical development for the literary critic.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 31.

⁵⁴ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 44.

However, Forrest-Thomson's adoption of formalism presents a difficult paradox. She prioritises form above all else, allowing the inclusion of the extra-textual only within the boundaries set by the interplay between the levels of the poem.⁵⁵ On the one hand, Forrest-Thomson accepts the multi-systemic nature of the text as a premise for analysis, whilst simultaneously rejecting a consideration of the extra-textual as a part of that analysis. This infers that the text exists in isolation, a closed system distinct of exterior relations. A consideration of Roland Barthes' observations is helpful here, particularly his thoughts on the practical critical relevance of structuralist linguistics to the study of literature. In the short essay 'Science Versus Literature', published in *The Times Literary Supplement*, Barthes proposes two possible analogies. The first suggests that we can consider the individual text as synonymous with the linguistic system of relations. In this case, the poem is metaphorical with the language system, and is analysed as such.⁵⁶ This first proposition aligns with Forrest-Thomson's formalism, where the text is distinct, a system in and of itself, analysed according to its constituent levels. Culler adopts Barthes' terminology and describes the function of this approach as 'criticism'.⁵⁷ The second is more expansive and proposes that literature at large, as a body of interrelated works, is synonymous with the language system. In this case, the poem, like a unit of speech, is a realisation of that system and must be considered in relation to other instances (or texts) that the system allows and enables.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Sheppard, *The Meaning of Form*, p. 31.

⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, 'Science Versus Literature', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 28 September 1967, pp. 897-8.

⁵⁷ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 113.

⁵⁸ Barthes, 'Science versus Literature', pp. 897-8.

Culler indicates that it is the second of these two theoretical propositions that contains the most interest, whilst also being the more difficult to support.⁵⁹ The text is not a solitary product but an object constituent of an abstract system. However, where formalism produces its own content, intertextuality of this sort is insignificant, but only if we accept that the text can be analysed as a singularity, distinct from a larger system and other related texts constituent to it. The scope of this thesis is too narrow to provide a comprehensive theorisation of, as Barthes puts it, the 'science of literature'.⁶⁰ However, we can adopt the notion that the text is not a singularity and consider both internal and external features to better enable the process of analysis, even where that analysis is termed a 'good' naturalisation.

By way of analogy, I consider the text as a circle. We can analyse a circle within the confines of its circumference, never transcending the limitations placed upon us by its form. Conversely, we can conduct an analysis via the exterior of the object, along the outer boundary of its circumference. This is also limiting, restricting as it is to a surface account of the object. These two approaches are analogous with internal expansion and limitation and external expansion and limitation respectively. Additionally, we can propose to move beyond the circle in question to another at an approximate distance, and then to another, and another. Each of these circles is representative of another text, another poem, to which the poem in question is related.

The text is not a singularity and cannot be analysed as such. There is some agreement intrinsic to Forrest-Thomson's approach, which infers that we can,

⁵⁹ Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 113.

⁶⁰ Barthes, 'Science versus Literature', pp. 897-8.

during the process of naturalisation, utilise the concept of a developing thematic synthesis as a barometer by which to judge the relevance of the poem's constituent devices. This in turn assumes that the reader must cognitively suspend extra-textual concepts during analysis. The process of naturalisation must therefore be an amalgam of internal expansion and limitation and external expansion and limitation. A thematic synthesis is achieved only through a dialogue between these two different positions of analysis. Thus, a unilateral critical approach is insufficient. The following diagram in Figure 18 is indicative of the augmented approach I now take in a naturalisation of Walker's poems:

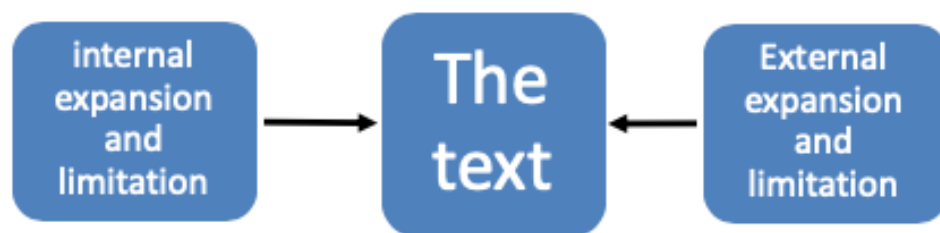


Figure 18: Naturalisation Process

The diagram makes explicit the requirement for the reader to consider both internal and external factors when analysing the text. A move away from absolute formalism is required, as the poem must be approached from multiple points of consideration in response to not only the multifaceted nature of its construction, but also to the quality it has of being but one communicative trace of an underlying system, an intertextual constituent. With this said, it is required that an augmentation of Forrest-Thomson's schema for naturalisation takes place to enable the reader to engage with and make intelligible texts that feature textual superimposition and repercussive illegibility. The following schematic (Figure

19) seeks to assimilate these thoughts into a workable method by which to analyse a text where textual superimposition features as a formal device:

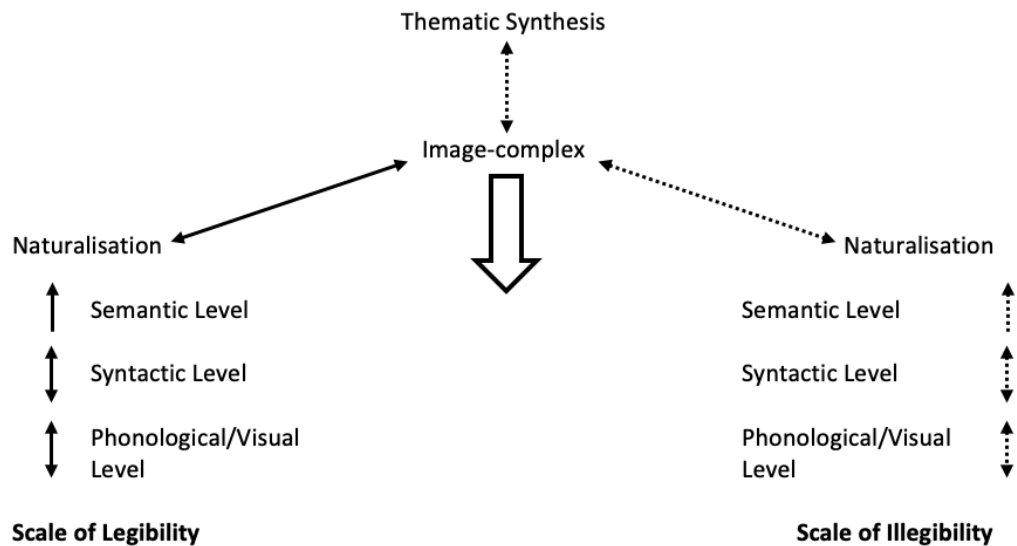


Figure 19: Naturalisation and the Illegible Schematic

Similarly to Forrest-Thomson's schematic, the diagram is divided into two segments. Forrest-Thomson's differs in that it premises analysis upon relevance and irrelevance. I have, as previously discussed, rejected the notion that any part of a poem is irrelevant. Instead, I have delineated the schematic in terms of that which is readable and that which is not: the 'Scale of Legibility' and the 'Scale of Illegibility'. This parallels the formal composition of the works contained in *Condensations* and the two other texts examined in later chapters. The inference is that in order to attain a thematic synthesis, one must attempt to naturalise both the legible and illegible sections of the text. To assimilate the two sides of the diagram, I have adopted the image-complex, a notion derived from Forrest-Thomson and which performs a similar function to that in her own schema: a means by which the reader is enabled to bring together 'levels of poetic

organisation and [move] towards some new kind of organisation'.⁶¹ This process is enabled by 'a level of coherence', an immaterial notion relating to the assimilation of the constituent levels. As will be shown, assimilation between the levels on the Scale of Illegibility is a somewhat different undertaking than that on the Scale of Legibility. As a result, the conjoining lines that describe the reader's trajectory through the text are broken on the scale of illegibility. This indicates the various degrees of possibility in naturalising the illegible in terms of achieving a coherent thematic synthesis. The presence of textual superimposition, whilst not formally irrelevant, may restrict the process of making the text intelligible via a normative reading. For example, Forrest-Thomson places the phonological and visual on the same level in her model.⁶² The lines in the poems she analyses are legible and allow for the identification of metaphor and simile. It is rare to find in *Condensations* an extended sequence of lines that can be 'read' normatively. Where there are legible areas, these are legible only in part as the overprinting obscures some of the text. This means that the identification of the image (the figurative image) in *Condensations* is a more difficult undertaking. This is indicated by the broken lines in my own model.

However, there are instances where language is juxtaposed, at various levels of overprinting, in such a way as to suggest that the content of one piece of writing may be considered within the context of another. This is a formal feature of the textually superimposed parts of *Condensations*; some areas are defined by a nucleated overprinting that creates densely packed areas of text; in other areas

⁶¹ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 38.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 39.

the overprinting is more sporadic. From the poem 'Says', one such sporadic example reads, 'witness my hand / a linguistic atlas'.⁶³ The example is provided below:

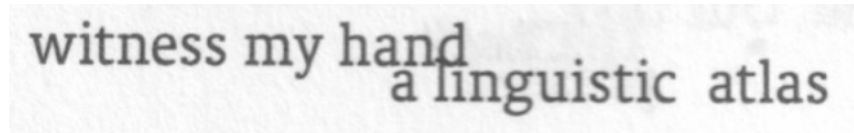


Figure 20: Nathan Walker, extract from 'Says', *Condensations*, p. 12.

The latter line is placed below the former in the poem and they are overprinted on the 'd' of 'hand' and the 'l' of linguistic'. This formal device creates contiguity but not illegibility and carries the inference of interrelation. The poem requests that the reader 'witness my hand', the slight overprinting of 'a linguistic atlas' infers that the hand itself is an atlas of language. We can make several propositions about the word 'atlas' here. It may refer to: a compilation of maps or charts; the topmost vertebra of the backbone where the spine meets the skull; a stone carving of a male figure, or one who sustains a burden through great strength'.⁶⁴ What the excerpt exemplifies is the use of textual superimposition to juxtapose linguistic terms and produce (at least the possibility) of an image that is intelligible during the process of a good naturalisation. The reader's knowledge determines the connotations procured from the words contained in that section of the poem, but it is the form that determines that an association should or could occur.

⁶³ Walker, *Condensations*, p. 12.

⁶⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary* [online], 'Atlas'. Available from: <https://www.oed.com/> [accessed 6 March 2018].

With the difficulties that textual superimposition imposes upon the image in mind, I have chosen to begin a good naturalisation on both the scale of legibility and the scale of illegibility at the phonological/visual level. The grapheme is the minimal unit in written language. As the minimal unit, the grapheme is useful in textually superimposed poems as it provides the possibility for the identification of meaningful communicative units even where the overprinting is nucleated and the text largely illegible. It is from this premise that we can then move up through the other constituent levels towards a naturalisation of the text. I use the same section of the poem 'Says' as for the bad naturalisation and reproduce it here for ease of reference.⁶⁵ The excerpt is illustrative of the tension between areas of nucleated and sporadic textual superimposition:

sheepcotes
heads
gonds
mouths
praises
called
second
his brother
here
state
at
rise
dale
abandoned
a poor name
arisen

arose, or has since arisen
Pishgah
reaches
spoke
Rib and Slab
refers to land
to drown
for exploration
never been repeated

Figure 21: Nathan Walker, extract from 'Says', *Condensations*, p. 22.

⁶⁵ Walker, *Condensations*, p. 22.

I start with the sections that are either entirely legible or overprinted but identifiable and therefore readable in part. These sections are numerous, and I list them below in order from the top left of the excerpt to the bottom right:

- Sheepcotes
- Heads and mouths
- Praise
- His bro
- Dale
- Far cry
- Abandoned
- A poor name
- Arisen
- arose, or has since arisen
- reaches
- rib and slab
- spoke
- refers to land
- to drown
- for exploration
- never been repeated

Taking the schematic in Figure 19 as the guide, I begin at the phonological level on the scale of legibility. There are certainly instances where phonological devices are present, particularly repetition. These occur most frequently on the short vowel /I/ present in words such as ‘rib’ and ‘his’; the /æ/ vowel sound found in ‘slab’ and ‘has’; the elongated /ɔ:/ sound present in words such as ‘poor’ and ‘for’; the diphthong /əʊ/ in words such as ‘spoke’ and ‘arose’; and the diphthong /eɪ/ present in ‘praise’ and ‘dale’. There are multiple instances of the use of the mid-central vowel schwa /ə/ also, in the first sound of the word ‘arisen’, for example. To identify instances of repetition is useful in works that are wholly legible and has formed a large part of textual analysis for some time. The term ‘parallelism’, associated particularly with critics working in and around the

theoretical positions of the Russian formalists, is used to describe the repetition of grammatical or sonic features in the poetic text. Jakobson, in 1966, writes:

When approaching the linguistic problem of grammatical parallelism one is irresistibly impelled quote again and again the pathbreaking study written exactly one hundred years ago by the Juvenile Gerard Manley Hopkins.⁶⁶

Influenced by Manley Hopkins, the detection of parallelism constitutes a central role in Jakobson's poetic analyses. Culler discusses in *Structural Poetics* an analysis by Jakobson of a single poem by Baudelaire, 'Spleen'. Although Culler questions the validity of Jakobson's conclusions, based as they are on some tenuous points of analysis, he concedes that Jakobson does 'show the importance of syntactic parallelism' as a grammatical trope utilised to structure poetic works.⁶⁷ Similarly, in the 1917 essay 'Art as Technique', Shklovsky writes, 'Poetic imagery is a means of creating the strongest possible impression... it is neither more nor less effective than ordinary or negative parallelism'.⁶⁸ Here, Shklovsky aligns the device of parallelism (repetition) with that of the image and extols them both as central means of elevating the text from utilitarian to artificial. Writing in the latter half of the twentieth century, Lotman also describes these instances of similarity as parallelism, a device of 'secondary poetic structure' that elevates the ordinary text from the poetic.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Roman Jakobson, 'Grammatical Parallelism and its Russian Facet', *Language*, 42.2 (1966), pp. 399-429. Available from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/411699> [accessed 8 February 2018], (p. 399).

⁶⁷ Culler, *Structural Poetics*, p. 67.

⁶⁸ Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

⁶⁹ Lotman, *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, p. 37.

The echoes of this position are detectable in Forrest-Thomson's analysis of Shakespeare's 94th sonnet, in which words are grouped together according to similarities in their constituent sounds.⁷⁰ Propositions as to the function of the poem's constituent parts are made via the association of sonically related features. But how does this relate to texts that feature illegibility? We can postulate that the legible areas can be read in much the same way as with a poetic text where textual superimposition is not used as a device. Those sounds that occur numerous link the words that contain them.⁷¹ If we group words together according to phonological similarity, we can then consider the image before we move to the next level of the schematic, the syntactic level.

The earlier discussion on Figure 20 is indicative of the reader's ability to construct meaning from imagery from parts of the text that are legible and an association between them is inferred. In that example the association is spatial, but the same course of analysis can occur if the legible text is considered as bound by sonic similarity. It is possible to, for example, make associations between the words 'his', 'rib', 'since' and 'arisen' as they share the phoneme /I/ and begin to use this sonic assimilation to propose an artificial function. The language is indicative of biblical texts but there is no apparent imagery, the simile and the metaphor for example are absent.

Although the reader is restricted by the lack of structured lines and a coherent syntax – there is the example of 'arose, or has since arisen', but this is

⁷⁰ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 44.

⁷¹ The use of sonic linkage to naturalise the text occurs on both scales but on the Scale of Illegibility the lack of identifiable phonemes acts to foreground the sonic characteristics of those scant legible or partially legible areas. As such, when reading the illegible areas of the poem, orality becomes a central mode by which to naturalise the text. This is reflected in the performativity of *Condensations*, which is ascribed by Walker himself as a descriptor of the text. This is further discussed in later pages.

the exception and not the rule – there are further possibilities at the syntactic level. For example, ‘His’ is the masculine third person possessive pronoun, used to denote ownership. The only other noun that shares the same sound is ‘rib’, so we can propose that there is a direct relationship between these two examples: the ‘rib’ is ‘his’. Although these two words occur at different spatial points in the work, they can be linked both sonically and syntactically. ‘Arisen’ is a verb form with various meanings, ‘to get up from a fall’, ‘to rise from the dead’ and ‘to ascend, go or come higher’, for example.⁷² ‘Since’ is a word of numerous usage dependent upon the context in which it is found.⁷³ Usefully, we have the example ‘arose, or has since arisen’ from the poem itself and can see that the word is used as a temporal adverb to modify the verb ‘arisen’. Thus far we have identified a pronoun, a noun, a verb and an adverb. From these syntactic constituents we can choose to either attempt to construct a cogent syntactic structure, to project towards possible structures, or to make semantic connections in the shadow of an unrealised but suggested syntax.

The point here is that the presence of textual superimposition does not prevent an analysis supposed from those words that can be read. Also, and similarly to Forrest-Thomson, we have legitimate ‘reasons for the appearance’ of identified linguistic constituents ‘without even touching on the thematic level’.⁷⁴ Of course, in projecting towards a potential syntax we begin to build relationships between the words in question, but this is unavoidable as ‘syntax,

⁷² *Oxford English Dictionary* [online], ‘Arisen’. Available from: <https://www.oed.com/> [accessed 8 February 2018].

⁷³ *Oxford English Dictionary* [online], ‘Since’. Available from: <https://www.oed.com/> [accessed 9 February 2018].

⁷⁴ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 44.

through its creation of meaning, is a prime agent in transforming other realms of discourse into the realm of artifice'.⁷⁵

With that said, we can now begin to project towards a potential syntax and place those words that are related through sound into a coherent structure. The four words are 'his', 'rib', 'since' and 'arisen'. The verb 'arisen' is the past participle of the verb 'to rise' but in the archaic form. 'Arisen' may constitute one verb of a phrase in the perfect form, which requires the auxiliary verb 'had' or 'has' followed by the past participle. To ascertain the correct tense, we can turn to the adverb 'since', which suggests the action of the verb occurred sometime on the past. Thus, we project towards the construction of the following sentence: 'his rib has since arisen'.

The movement from smaller units, the letter and the word, towards larger syntactic structures moves us closer to the semantic level, at which the sentences produced begin to 'mean' in the traditional sense. The line 'his rib has since arisen', along with any other cogent structures it is possible to produce from the text, comprise the material the reader must make intelligible during a naturalisation of the text. It is clear that a naturalisation of the legible areas of the poems in *Condensations* will occur and produce results variously from a naturalisation of a Shakespearean sonnet. The arrival at a total interpretation of the work, a thematic synthesis, similar to that achieved by Forrest-Thomson, and Empson (although via different means) of Sonnet 94, will remain elusive. One reader may be able to read some of the superimposed language where another cannot (therefore it is not possible to say absolutely which language is either

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 44.

overprinting. This is mostly true at the level of the letter and, with labour, the word. What is evident is that textual superimposition need not render language completely illegible, even in circumstances such as this where the nucleation of graphemic marks obstruct the act of a normative reading. The consequence for the word of Walker's process, the 'erasing [of] material from pages of books and manuscripts' followed by the 'superimposing' [of] partially erased pages', is not to wholly eradicate the formal integrity of the constituent text to the point of unrecognisability.⁷⁷ The reader can still identify the material used as written language. Indeed, Walker's condensations are both 'visual texts for performance' and an opportunity to superimpose text to 'bring together figures from Lakeland history... [to] assemble new relationships'.⁷⁸ As such, legibility in the book is as important as illegibility, both for the poet during performance and the reader during a more intimate reading.⁷⁹

However, there are areas of the poem that are wholly illegible, where the abundance of graphemic marks precludes a normative reading and creates abstract shapes more akin to visual than textual artworks, and it is these that concern the Scale of Illegibility. One such area is highlighted in Figure 22 by the black rectangle. Here, the possible consequences for the written word of textual superimposition become more evident as some of the language, whilst still identifiable as such, is entirely illegible. In a review of the *Condensations*, Caleb

⁷⁷ Walker, *Condensations*, p. 7.

⁷⁸ Nathan Walker, 'Uniformagazine: Condensations' [online], *Nathan Walker: Blog* (2016). Available from: <http://nathan-walker.co.uk> [accessed 28 March 2018].

⁷⁹ For a two-month period, Walker was the Writer in Residence at the Armitage Museum in Ambleside in 2016. The museum's libraries were the source of the appropriated materials used in the composition of *Condensations*. The Museum has links with Kurt Schwitters also, who spent the final years of his life living and producing works in the Lake District. Several the artist's works, including collages, are housed at the museum today.

Klaces describes his contact with the poems and states, ‘rarely have I enjoyed failing to read a book as much as *Condensations*’.⁸⁰ In terms of the schematic in Figure 19, the failure of the reading process stands as a barrier to the naturalisation of illegible language. Whilst it is still possible to identify some letterforms in the example (it is possible to identify the vowel ‘a’ and the consonant ‘m’, for example) and therefore the phoneme associated with that grapheme – which is useful performatively – some of the text remains completely elusive. The text may be performative for the poet, but the ability to move through the constituent levels, from the phonological/visual to the syntactic and semantic levels is impeded such that a naturalisation of the illegible language is not possible.⁸¹ This seems somewhat obvious to say, but what it does reveal is that a schematised approach to reading is insufficient if the text features areas of illegibility.

Walker’s poems are objects capable of encompassing disparate states of being in concurrence. Indeed, it is the multi-systemic capacity, the resistance to reduction in the formulation of succinct definitions of its forms, which align the poet’s book with Victor Shklovsky’s suggestion that ‘the technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar”, to make forms difficult’.⁸² This is evident in the failure to naturalise illegible language. Poetry engaged in the exploration of innovative forms are difficult, defined as they are by their foregrounding of process and, therefore, the internal elements of the text itself. This is emphasised at its most

⁸⁰ *The White Review*, ‘Books of the Year’. Available from: <http://www.thewhitereview.org> [accessed 29 March 2018].

⁸¹ Walker, ‘Uniformagazine: Condensations’. The poet states as much in this blog post on his time at the Armitage Museum as the Writer in Residence. He describes the poems in *Condensations* as ‘visual texts for performance’.

⁸² Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique’.

extreme by Forrest-Thomson's method of textual analysis and is evidenced in the illegible forms in *Condensations*. However, the formalist approach to a critical reading of the poetic text adopted by Forrest-Thomson does not provide (even when augmented) an appropriate method by which to approach textually superimposed texts. Another, more appropriate, approach to illegibility is required

To that end, the discussion in the following pages of Chapter Two considers Waldrop's text *Camp Printing*. The case study contains an analysis of the procedural method by which Waldrop takes a legible text and forces it through incremental stages of illegibility via superimpositional processes. This premises a discussion upon alternate modes of negotiating texts that resist a naturalisation via normative means due to the presence of illegibility.

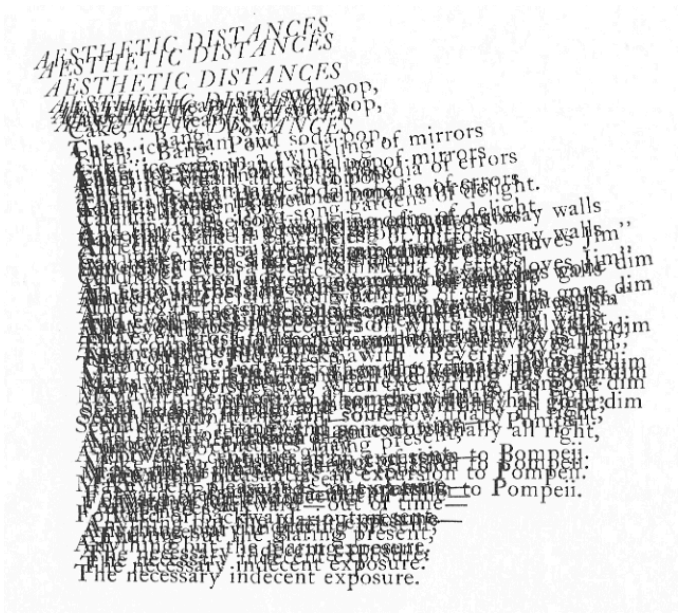


Figure 23: Rosmarie Waldrop, Camp Printing (1970)

The last chapter on the work of Walker addressed consequences for the written word and the process of reading of textual superimposition and illegibility. I now move to an investigation of the *process* of superimposition as a means of generating poetic texts. The following pages address textual superimposition as a graduated method that gives rise to illegibility. To that end, the text I will be investigating is Waldrop's *Camp Printing* (1970). The book was published by Burning Deck, a press concerned with literary Avant-Gardes that published its first title in 1961.¹ *Camp Printing* is composed of overprintings of several lyric

¹ Steve Evans, 'Rosmarie Waldrop' (1996), *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Poets Since World War II* [online]. Ed. by Joseph Conte. Vol. 169. (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1996), pp. 284-296 (p. 286). Available from: <https://go-galegroup-com.edgehill.idm.oclc.org> [accessed 8 May 2019].

poems written by James Camp, an academic contemporary of Waldrop's husband, Keith Waldrop.² In the context of Waldrop's canon, *Camp Printing* is an obscure text, cited by Steve Evans as produced early in the writer's career (the book was the third of her many publications).³ *Camp Printing* is available in full at the resource website *UbuWeb*.⁴

Waldrop's text is a useful example of superimposition as an incremental process. The poet subjects several poems to progressive overprintings. The consequence is that the text moves from a state of almost complete legibility to almost complete illegibility.⁵ In the systematic transformation of its form, *Camp Printing* provides an example of how a progressive movement towards illegibility stages and questions both the signifying capacity and material function of the written word.⁶ As such, this short book evidences the consequence of superimposition for the text's signifying functionality at the textual level and its material facilities at the figural level.

Toward this aim, I consider incremental illegibility as a means of producing poems that reduce the primacy of linguistic signification whilst increasing the material character of the written word.⁷ The consequence is the

² Harriet Staff, 'Burning Deck Retires After 56 Years' (2017), *The Poetry Foundation* [online].

Available from:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2017/12/Burning%20Deck%20Retires%20After%2056%20Years> [accessed 7 May 2019].

³ Steve Evans, 'Rosmarie Waldrop' (2006), *Third Factory: Notes to Poetry, 2006* [online].

Available from: <http://www.thirdfactory.net> [accessed 5 May 2019].

⁴ Waldrop, *Camp Printing*.

⁵ That the poems do not become entirely illegible is an important factor that I will expand upon in later pages.

⁶ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 72. I borrow here from Dworkin's use of the term 'exophoric', which he describes as 'a "content" of purely referential signifieds'. On a sliding scale, exophora inhabits one end of the scale and 'materiality' the other.

⁷ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 72. 'Materiality' of the written medium refers to the opaque mark made by ink on paper by the printing process. As the number of superimpositions increases and the materiality of the medium 'asserts itself' the exophoric 'possibilities diminish in proportion'.

graded production of a textual object that possesses autonomy of phenomenological space. In the use of textual superimposition, the loss of one text, the one that signifies linguistically and occupies textual space, allows another to be produced, the material text that occupies figural space. To support this proposition, I draw from Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that the poetic text is 'not independent of every material aid, and... would be irrevocably lost if its text were not preserved down to the last detail'.⁸ Writing in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty indicates that the poem is existentially dependent upon the exact preservation of its linguistic form.⁹ In the context of textual superimposition, Waldrop's process in *Camp Printing* functions to destabilise the existential claim of Camp's original poems.

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962), pp. 174-5.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 174-5.

From Reading to Seeing: Illegibility and the Process of Superimposition

Camp Printing opens with Waldrop's first overprinting of James Camp's 'A Serenade and Requiem for Public Figures Playing Private Parts' and features the poem printed twice on the same page, one printing over the other.¹⁰ It is of immediate note that Camp's poem is not provided in its original and singular printing. This is suggestive of the effaceable effect that Waldrop's treatment of his work has upon both the text and its original author. The proceeding five pages of *Camp Printing* feature the same poem subject to accumulative superimpositions that force the component words to convolute in incremental illegibility. The first iteration of the poem is provided below in Figure 24:

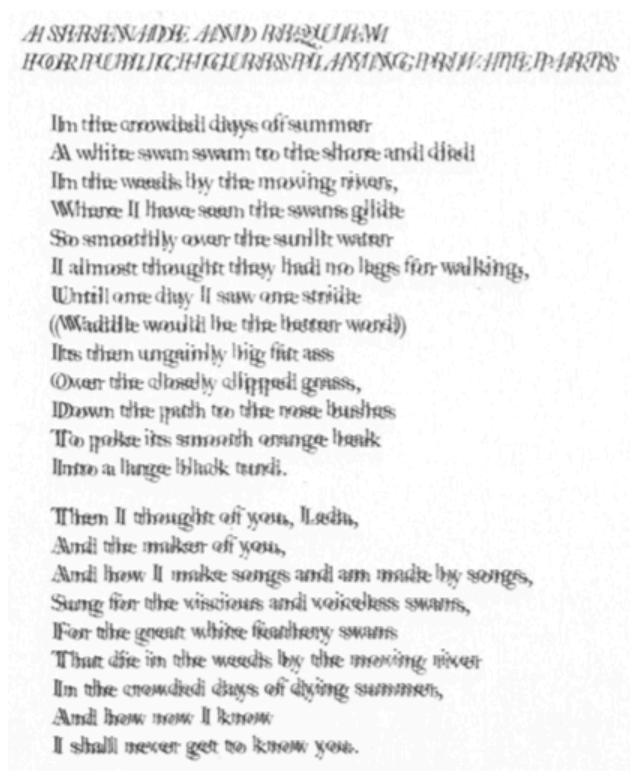


Figure 24: Rosmarie Waldrop, *Camp Printing* (1970)

¹⁰ I use the term 'overprinting' to denote the process by which Waldrop achieves textual superimposition. 'Overprinting' is but one method the writer can use to superimpose text.

In the example, almost all the linguistic elements of the poem are legible with some effort, and context allows the reader to make propositions towards the identity of those words that are either in part or wholly illegible. This is despite the strength of the effect of superimposition even at a stage where just two printings have been made. For example, the first two lines read, 'In the crowded days of summer / a white swan swam to the shore and died!'.¹¹ In *Reading the Illegible*, Dworkin addresses a consequence for the text when the form of the grapheme is ill-defined and suggests that the 'shifting dynamic between opacity and transparency [explains] why so many difficult and visually unconventional works seem self-referential'.¹² Dworkin identifies this effect in another of the poems from *Camp Printing*, but it is detectable in the above example also. As the legibility of the poem's lexicon decreases it begins to manifest in its linguistic componentry a self-referentiality that acknowledges and alludes to the metamorphosis of its form. For example, reading 'A Serenade and Requiem...' in Figure 24, the words of the poem begin to *die* as it becomes *crowded* via superimposition. The words *stride* away from transparency, *moving* towards *voiceless* illegibility. Consequently, the reader *shall never get to know* the *dying* text as it was *made* in its original, legible appearance.¹³ Due to Waldrop's overprinting, textual superimposition functions to emphasise the capacity that language possesses for signification by testing that capacity via a disruption of the formal integrity of the written word, the inscribed graphemic mark. At this stage of the overprinting process, where deteriorating graphemic form means

¹¹ Waldrop, *Camp Printing*.

¹² Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 73.

¹³ Waldrop, *Camp Printing*.

the text is largely legible but also threatening to move towards illegibility, the language itself seems to share in the knowledge of its own demise.

Additionally, the reader is compelled to confront the fragility of written language and, at this early phase of the overprinting process, to attempt to resist the force it exerts upon language as it renders – or threatens to render – it illegible. Reading becomes a process of attrition as portions of the text elude readability. The effect is enhanced by the presence of visual phenomena consequent of textual superimposition. ‘A Serenade and Requiem’ shimmers on the page upon observation. Any lingering scrutiny of the text seems to concentrate the effect and presents an additional barrier to reading. As such, the presence of two prints of the same text on the same page emphasises not only the threat of the loss of signification but also the obverse amplification of the materiality of the grapheme. The two states are staged concurrently in a single text.

With regard to reading, I borrow terminology from Leon Roudiez, who describes modes of composition such as this – that resist normative reading modes – as ‘paragrammatic’.¹⁴ Roudiez provides a definition of the ‘paragram’ in an isolation of some of the theoretical positions of the post-structural publication *Tel Quel*, a poststructuralist French literary magazine founded in the 1960s that adopted Derridean notions of the deconstruction of the Saussurean sign.¹⁵ Roudiez explains that a text is paragrammatic if it enables a reading that subverts

¹⁴ *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online]. ‘Paragrammatism’. Available from: <http://www.oed.com.edgehill.idm.oclc.org> [Accessed 3rd January 2019]. Paragrammatism is defined by the OED as ‘Incorrect use of grammatical or syntactical elements in certain forms of aphasia and other speech disorders’.

¹⁵ Roudiez, ‘Twelve Points from *Tel Quel*’, *L’Esprit Createur*, 14 (4), (Winter 1974), pp. 291-303. (p. 297-301).

grammatical expectation and encourages the discovery of 'networks of signification not accessible through conventional reading habits'.¹⁶ The definition seems prototypical for the function of artifice in poetry more generally, particularly when considered as antithetical to the utilitarian function of language in prose texts. It will become increasingly clear in further examples from *Camp Printing* that accumulative overprintings preclude a reading via normative modes, as a greater quantity of the language becomes illegible.¹⁷

However, the paragrammatic function of the process of superimposition is most sharply defined at this intermediate stage where just two or three printings have been made, as the ailing opportunity to read customarily is most lucidly perceived. At present, it is of use to consider McCaffery's description of the functional consequence of superimposition, which he describes as 'deterritorializing linguistic codes'.¹⁸ McCaffery refers here to the capacity that superimposition has to subvert the expectation of readerly linearity and, by extension, grammaticalness. Waldrop's overprinting enacts a reading that disestablishes Camp's use of normative grammar and we are most keenly aware of this as the process of reading is made more difficult. In the example in Figure 25, where three prints of the same text occupy the page space, the partitions that delineate the sentence into its constituent phrases – the noun phrase, the verbal phrase, adjuncts, complements and prepositional phrases – are disrupted and this removes one strategy by which the difficult visual prosody of the work could

¹⁶ Leon Roudiez, 'Twelve Points from Tel Quel', p. 300.

¹⁷ Roudiez addresses the legible text in his own delineation of the term. I extend its use here to include superimpositional processes that require in a similar fashion alternate reading modes.

¹⁸ Steve McCaffery, *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973–1986* (New York, NY: Roof Books, 1986), p. 103.

be negotiated. As such, a superimpositional printing is a suggestive and enabling act on the part of the writer that encourages an approach to the text that does not conform to 'conventional reading habits'.¹⁹ Figure 25 is provided below:

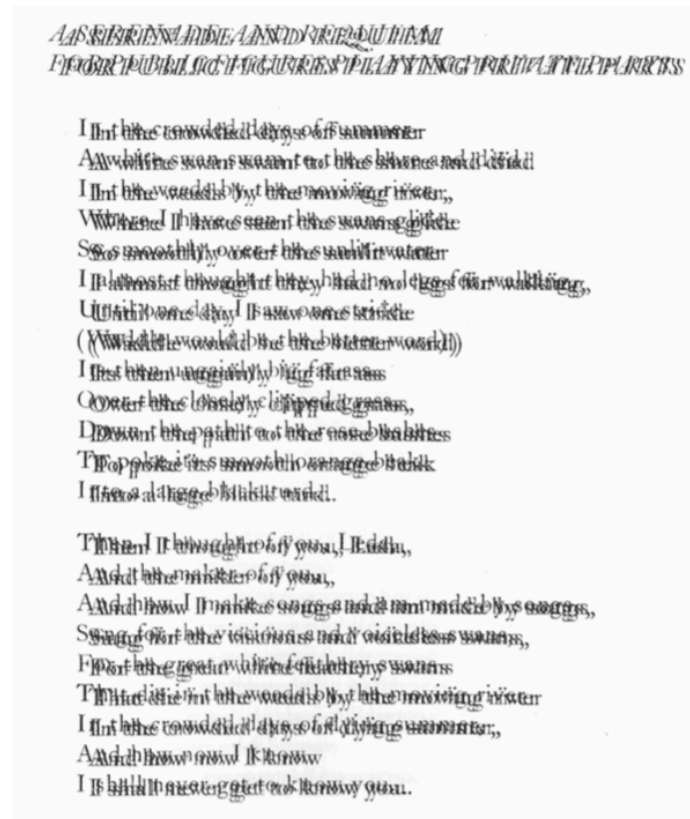


Figure 25: Rosmarie Waldrop, *Camp Printing* (1970)

Addressing the example, the addition of a third layer to Waldrop's poems suggests that her compositional process conforms to, if not a strict, then a modulated means of composition. This is achieved, Dworkin suggests, via the use of 'medial technologies... which permit the same sheet to be printed with some precision', and this enabled Waldrop to produce purposeful overprints that conform to a single axis.²⁰ The precise technology used in the production of the

¹⁹ Roudiez, 'Twelve Points from Tel Quel', p. 300.

²⁰ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 75.

book was the letterpress.²¹ This was the primary equipment employed by the Waldrop's for all of the printing towards Burning Deck publications at its inception.²² Typesetting is, as Waldrop suggests, 'so slow a process' that the loading of the forme (the name given to a group of type pieces that are bound to form a single page), the inking, and the final impression is a painstaking task. The exactness of the compositional process in Waldrop's book is symptomatic then of the restrictive nature of the procedure and operating method of the letterpress. Any disruptions in the printing axes are achieved via 'offset' prints of the same text on the same page; the offsets are determined by the placement and replacement of the page upon the forme by the writer/printer.²³ There is an irony in the precise nature of the technological process used to produce superimposed texts that disrupt the precision of the grapheme; precision seems somewhat antithetical to the destructive function. It is, after all, the page and not the forme that is adjusted between prints, meaning the printing apparatus remains stationary throughout. Despite this, it is the subversive use of the technology that innovates its application and allows for the production of texts that surpass the capacities of its originating design.

The experimentations in *Camp Printing* reveal that the use of prescriptive technologies allow the writer to plunge into the act of arranging and rearranging the Camp texts with some provision of compositional certainty and, therefore, control. To some extent, the limitations of the letterpress enable the overprinting mode that Waldrop uses. The effect could not be achieved in the same manner by

²¹ *Brown University* [online], 'Forty Years of Burning Deck Press, 1961 – 2001' (2000). Available from <https://library.brown.edu> [accessed 19 February 2019].

²² Steve Evans, 'Rosmarie Waldrop'.

²³ *Brown University*, 'Forty Years of Burning Deck Press, 1961 – 2001'.

more advanced digital technologies – the cassette-fed laser printer will not accept paper unless the feed conforms exactly to predetermined axes – and so would require the writer to offset the text with a computer programme between each print. For example, the same text can be reproduced on one page via the copy/paste function in word processing programmes. However, this is more the application of a standardised electronic and programmatic utility than an experimentation with printing technologies.

Both analogue and digital technologies differ in terms of the processes undertaken to produce a superimposed text, but they share the characteristic of restraint, which they place upon the writer but in different ways. Dworkin addresses this in a statement on the analogue technologies used by Waldrop, where he states, '*Camp Printing* [reveals] the possibilities and constraints' of its means of production.²⁴ Whilst restriction is certainly a feature of printing technology that must be negotiated, this does not erase the capacity of that equipment to, albeit in controlled circumstances, provide the writer with a means by which to produce texts that break out of the prosaic mould in which the machinery seeks to cast them. Also, such are the idiosyncrasies of individual printing methods, the creative work made with that method will within itself contain the mark of its mode of production. The restrictions and the possibilities of the technology are embodied in the formal compound of the object. This is evident in the work of Cobbing in Figure 10, for example. The linear formatting of the text in 'Are Your Children Safe in the Sea' is idiosyncratic of the typewriter and eludes to that machine as (at least a part of) its means of production.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 75.

The example in Figure 25 evidences the potential Waldrop's chosen printing method possesses to have the written word transit from legibility to illegibility. In doing so, the text reduces in its signifying capacity as its visual aspects are in equal measure foregrounded. Dworkin characterises the transition as moving towards 'abstract forms' that take advantage of 'the viscosity of writing for compositional ends'.²⁵ There are, however, areas of text that are still discernible through reading. This is particularly true of individual letters that are dramatized somewhat by the offsetting of the third print. For example, the first letters of each line of the third print are situated to the left and above the first two prints. The effect is suggestive of the acrostic poem, where the first letter of each line spells out a word and is at times emphasised via capitalisation or bold type. That acrostic effect is not generated here to the extent that the dramatized letters themselves form a word, but the letters are certainly amplified as examples of written language still discernible amongst a progressively illegible text. Contained in those remaining alienated letters is the potential for normative linguistic communication; we can from their number compose words such as 'outsaid', 'audios' and the archaic 'saidst'.²⁶ As the language in the text is further obscured, the dramatization of individual letters points to the loss of those larger, more complex linguistic structures such as the phrase, the clause and the sentence. Indeed, what does remain detectable at this stage is the delineation of separate words, which largely retain their individuality despite some bleeding across the spatial localities in which they are placed. The outcome is the retention in the text of the semblance of syntactic structure. The words themselves are

²⁵ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 72.

²⁶ This group of words provide a further example of the apparent reflexiveness of language as it is forced towards illegibility, defined as they are by a collective semantic field.

almost entirely elusive but incremental illegibility does not yet belie the original form of the work. Waldrop's progressive process of superimposition continues to dramatise the sparseness of the remaining legible text as a signal of an intent to obliterate language. As we hold onto the depleting visual character of normative syntax, the loss of that syntax and its function to structure communication is foregrounded and keenly felt. This is not the case when the third overprinting occurs (this equates to four copies of the poem on a single page). At this stage, both the legibility of the written word and the delineation of linear space is suppressed. The poem is provided below:

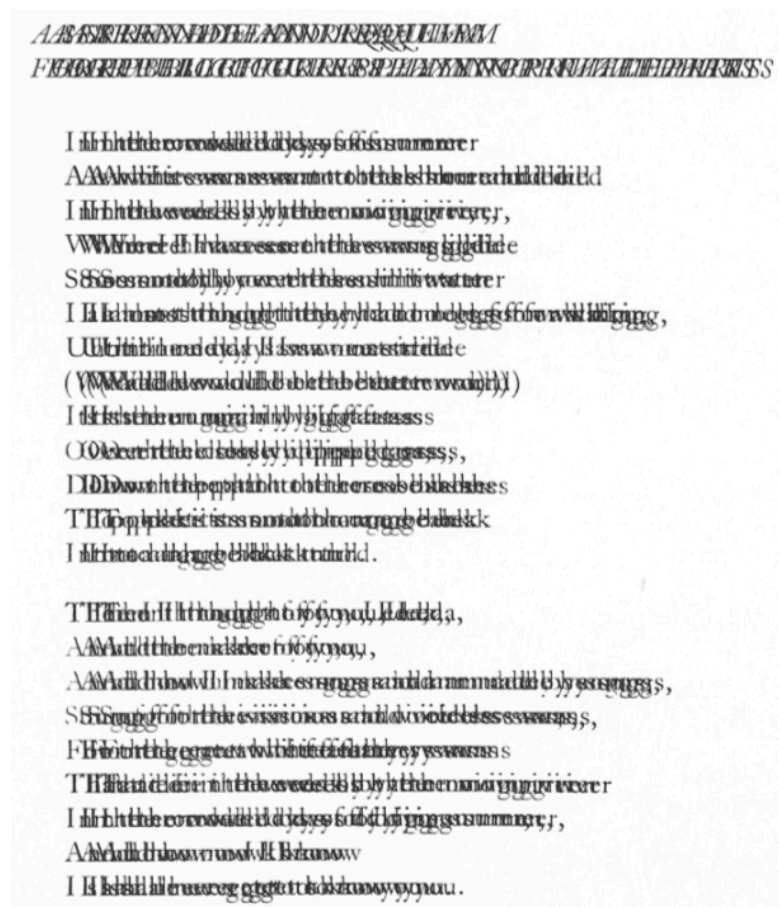


Figure 26: Rosmarie Waldrop, *Camp Printing* (1970)

Waldrop's offset printing method continues to render individual letters as legible. This is most apparent, as before, with the letters at the beginning, but also the end, of the lines. There are other means that one can use to aid in the identification of some of the poem's constituent letters (toward the following discussion, the diagram in Figure 27 exemplifies the areas discussed). For example, as the legibility of the graphemic mark falls away in the median zone – that is the area between the base line and the mean line, known as the 'x-height' – the presence of ascenders and descenders becomes more evident.



Figure 27: Anatomical Illustration of Typographical Mark

Those elements of the typographical mark that exceed both the upper and lower limits of the median zone, the ascenders and descenders, are those that most effectively resist the superimpositional effect of Waldrop's overprinting. The visibility of the ascenders and descenders provides some of the letters, otherwise obscured by the nucleation of ink in the median zone, with a unique signature identifiable in spite of the text's predominant illegibility. Provided below in Figure 28 is a magnified section of Figure 26:



Figure 28: Rosmarie Waldrop, *Camp Printing* (1970)

For the benefit of accuracy and ease of reference, I have marked one ascender – in the blue square – and two descenders – in the green and red squares. The yellow square does not feature an ascender but does contain a mark that facilitates identification of the grapheme. What is the use of those marks that reach out of the obliterating median zone to provide an identificatory signal? The reader can, if they so choose, attempt to use the marks to identify as best they can some of the graphemes otherwise obscured in the median zone of the text. For example, the green square contains a descender that conforms to that of the letter ‘y’, moving downwards and left from the baseline to the descender height line. It is also apparent that the font used features serifs, small lines at the end of characters designed, somewhat ironically, to make it easier to identify one letter from another. The descender in the red square indicates that the letter is ‘g’. Also, the mark in the blue square suggests that the letter from which it rises may be one of a variety that share similar ascender shapes including, ‘b’, ‘d’, ‘h’ or ‘l’. The mark in the yellow square conforms to the formal characteristics of the superscript dot (otherwise known as the ‘tittle’) that features on the lowercase letters ‘i’ and ‘j’.

If the text in the median zone is superimposed to such an extent that the marks are identifiable as graphemes but indistinguishable as letters, to what extent can a process of identification, where the ascender and descender is used to hypothesise towards an individual letter’s identity, be considered ‘reading’? It is possible to build words from the evidence accrued. This, however, is a reading not of the original text, but a separate reading that makes use of a portion of the language of the original. In essence, the reader is now forming a new text from scant material and in doing so, resigns the original text to the position of a

derivative of its constituent material. Somewhat similarly to the reading process in Walker's *Condensations*, the level of satisfactory interpretation possible from a normative negotiation of these few, scattered graphemes leaves a little to be desired. The possibilities are moderated by the form of the text, in which superimposition sequesters a substantial amount of the language in the realm of illegibility. Consequently, as the legible text diminishes, the number of possible combinations of letters is dramatically reduced such that a normative reading becomes an abbreviated variation in which the effectiveness of the process of signification is dramatically reduced. In a sense, both Walker and Waldrop's processes of superimposition create an illegibility that unbinds the remaining identifiable language from the formal context into which it was placed by the original authors of their source materials. Although it is still possible, this language offers little during a reading.

Recalling Merleau-Ponty, in the production of the new texts in *Camp Printing*, Waldrop erases in part the 'material aid' upon which the original text is dependent.²⁷ The consequence of this is a reduction in the integrity of the phenomenological claim of the original text. Waldrop's work in Figure 26 is not the object Camp produced and cannot be perceived as such. The linguistic material aid upon which 'A Serenade and Requiem for Public Figures Playing Private Parts' depends has been all but erased. Conversely, the obfuscation of the poem's linguistic material has created a new object. Decadent in its constitution from superimposed language, subversive in its illegibility, autonomous in its phenomenological claim, the object transcends the realm of textual space and

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 174-175.

takes possession of a plasticity that posits an additional existential claim in figural space. In what way can it be said of Waldrop's poem, constructed from illegible linguistic material, that it possesses phenomenological autonomy? This leads to the next discussion, where the unique form of the illegible poem is explored as a self-generative mark of spatial autonomy.

Spatial Autonomy of the Plastic Text

The following pages consider those examples of Waldrop's experimentations from *Camp Printing* that have become almost entirely illegible. More specifically, the latter printings of Camp's 'A Serenade and Requiem for Public Figures Playing Private Parts'. Towards this I propose that the writing of a letterform, the putting down of ink on paper, constitutes a 'graphemic gesture'. In both prosaic and poetic contexts where the mark is legible this gesture is made in acceptance of the mark's transparency and with the presupposition of apprehension; when we offer a graphemic gesture, we do so in order that it be read, and this assumption premises communicative discourse between the writer and the reader.²⁸ Indeed, 'the reader does not see' the letters and words that 'she or he reads, striving instead to hear the meaning of what the absent speaker – the author of the text – "meant to say"'.²⁹ These latter propositions come from Jean-François Lyotard and I will be drawing from his theoretical theory of the text and the object in *Discourse, Figure* (2011) throughout the following argument.³⁰ Lyotard suggests that textual discourse or 'writing' is perceived only as conduit and he juxtaposes this against material figures or 'objects', which require physical perceptive modes and which are themselves the target of perception. In the above comments, he alludes to the Saussurean claim that the linguistic sign is arbitrary and the marks that make up its material form are therefore semantically

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 227.

²⁹ Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, p. 211.

³⁰ Lyotard's uses the term 'discourse' as analogous with the 'text' and the term 'figure' as analogous with the material object. However, his own discourse makes clear that these two concepts are not entirely distinct and as such their definitions convolute at various stages of his discussion. I will adhere to the binary parallels in my own discussion and highlight and explain areas where the definitions become difficult.

inconsequential to the readerly act. He describes the space in which the written linguistic act occurs as 'graphic'. In graphic space, the function of the trace (the inscription made by the graphemic gesture) is to allow the practical 'distinguishing... [of] units that obtain their signification from their relationships in a system'.³¹ The graphic space is, therefore, that occupied by legible text. That the readerly act occurs in graphic space dictates that it 'is not [undertaken by] the sensory' faculties of the reader as the process of signification does not require that letterforms 'make themselves felt by the reader's body'.³²

Conversely, Lyotard describes the object or 'figure' as possessing a plasticity that provides it with a phenomenological claim to spatial autonomy. The visual arts of painting and sculpture fall into this category. The plastic object is in essence the visual object, experienced sensorially and extra to linguistic delimitation. Lyotard's exploration of the sensory put him at odds with structuralist theorists, for whom the intellectual faculties took precedence. It is important to contextualise these concepts with Waldrop's *Camp Printing*. The distinction to be made between the two relates directly to the graduated process of superimposition that occurs progressively in Waldrop's poems. Lyotard insists that the plastic figure leads 'the body... to adopt certain dispositions' in the act of perception whereas the text does not and this is due to the central position the body takes as a reference point for the perception of other plastic objects.³³ These conceptualisations are useful as they aid in the theorisation of the phenomenological shift that occurs in Waldrop's *Camp Printing* as the poems

³¹ Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, p. 206.

³² Ibid, p. 207-208.

³³ Ibid, p. 206.

move away from the textual space (where they are legible) towards figural space (where the text is predominantly illegible).

A graphemic gesture is made in both the legible and the illegible text. However, in each case, when the text is 'read' and when it is 'seen', the writer presupposes divergent modes by which the perceiver apprehends the 'significance' of that gesture.³⁴ The expected mode of perception, the way the writer expects the perceiver to respond to the graphemic gesture, alters when the text becomes either partly or largely illegible. The text is then not 'read' via normative means but 'seen' and experienced bodily as an autonomous object in figural space.

As we have seen throughout this thesis, the graphemic gesture, the inscription of a linguistic mark, can in fact be realised in myriad ways: as legible, illegible or as a combination of the two. It is easy to account for the legible poem; it is intended to be read and to be apprehended and the words are presented as such. The primary function of language is to provide a structured means of significant communication. It is more difficult to account for Waldrop's use of language in *Camp Printing*, where the process of overprinting superimposes text to progressive illegibility. When language fails to signify, when its exophoric capabilities are diminished, the pervasiveness of its material qualities increases in turn.³⁵ This is analogous with the distinction Lyotard makes between the text and the figure that possesses plasticity.³⁶ Eleanore Widger writes of Lyotard:

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 227.

³⁵ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 72.

³⁶ Lyotard's use of the word 'plasticity' is analogous with the term I use to refer to the 'material' aspects of the written word. Confusingly, he uses the word 'graphic' to denote language as 'transparent' or 'signifying' in the Saussurean sense but also as 'material'. I will make clarifications as needed where this distinction causes confusion in the argument.

According to him, only encounters with visual or figural artworks elicit a bodily response to the plasticity of the object, where linguistic or discursive works demand a response purely from intellectual faculties.³⁷

Lyotard's argument insists that the text does not require from the perceiver the use of their body in the mechanism of the response, and that only the mind need engage in the interpretation and experience of the written word. Again, Lyotard refers here to the signifier/signified dichotomy that defines the linguistic sign. Lyotard's proposition suggests that the transition of Waldrop's text from legibility to illegibility requires a corresponding shift in the mode of perception catalysed by a corresponding shift in the phenomenological character of the text. Lyotard elaborates and states of the legible text, 'the read-heard text is without depth, even without perceptible space', and then continues of visual works, 'the seen text dwells over there', where it can be perceived.³⁸ On the plasticity of the 'seen' object and its effect upon perception, Lyotard provides some qualifying features. He suggests that 'the body is led to adopt certain dispositions depending on whether it encounters an angle or a circle, a vertical or an oblique'.³⁹ The perception of these phenomena relates directly to the position of the human body.

The substance of Widger's argument against Lyotard's proposition can be summarised as opposition to the theory that the text cannot be 'read' and 'seen' at once. She puts forward the work of radical landscape poets such as Harriet

³⁷ Eleanore Widger, 'The Specific Evidentness of Contemporary Radical Landscape Poetry: Innovative Form and Spatial Presence in *The Ground Aslant*', *English*, 65 (251) (2016), pp. 363-386 (p. 365).

³⁸ Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, p. 265. There are some confusions in the Lyotard discussion, such as his use of the term 'seen text' in this example to denote the visual object or artwork. What is important is that the distinction remains, and I will qualify terminology as appropriate to maintain the sense of the discussion.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 206.

Tarlo and Mark Goodwin as evidence that the text can indeed signify linguistically whilst simultaneously dramatising its graphic characteristics and that these two distinct states can be simultaneously perceived.

My argument has a different emphasis. I apply Lyotard's distinctions to superimposed texts in order to account for the material aesthetic that occurs as a result of their illegibility. During a discussion on the legible and the plastic, Lyotard suggests that the perceptive modes required for each are divergent and relate to both immediacy and patience, he states:

One qualifies as "legible" what does not impede the eye's racing, that is, what lends itself immediately to recognition – think of the experiments monitoring the eye's movements while reading. Whereas in order to enter into communication with the energetics of the plastic line one must stop at the figure. The more the drawing makes way for this particular energetics, the more attention, waiting, and immobility it will require.⁴⁰

Lyotard's account of the legible as a resource that facilitates communication is a sufficient descriptor of James Camp's original poems, which do not require consideration of the materiality of the written word for semantic transmission. In reading, the recognition of the signals occurs with immediacy and is disregarded with equal expeditiousness. Indeed, Lyotard continues to clarify, '[i]n the end, what separates legibility from plasticity is the fact that in the former the eye needs to register only signals'.⁴¹ The material for Waldrop's experimentations began, at some time, as 'read' and occupied textual space. Subsequently, they have, through Waldrop's processes, metamorphosed into 'seen' texts that occupy plastic space. One biproduct of this is to obstruct the immediacy with which the linguistic signal is recognised. Another is to

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 210.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 211.

essentialise a suspension of immediate transmission by superimposing the graphemic mark to render it unrecognisable, or illegible. It is this adjustment that dictates that Waldrop's textual object be 'seen' as opposed to 'read'.

As previously stated, the effect is graduated concurrent to a successive number of overprints such that the latter poems, like the example in Figure 29 below, undergo a process of accumulative procurement of material space. That is, Waldrop's experimentations furnish her texts with a spatial autonomy derived from the illegibility of the mark made by the graphemic gesture. The poems begin to exist in figural space, their materiality, the nucleation of illegible marks, experienced not by the mind as interlocutory signal but by the body as plastic object. This occurs because of the failure of linguistic signification, which brings the work into the world, where it can be perceived not as linguistic conduit but as object proper.

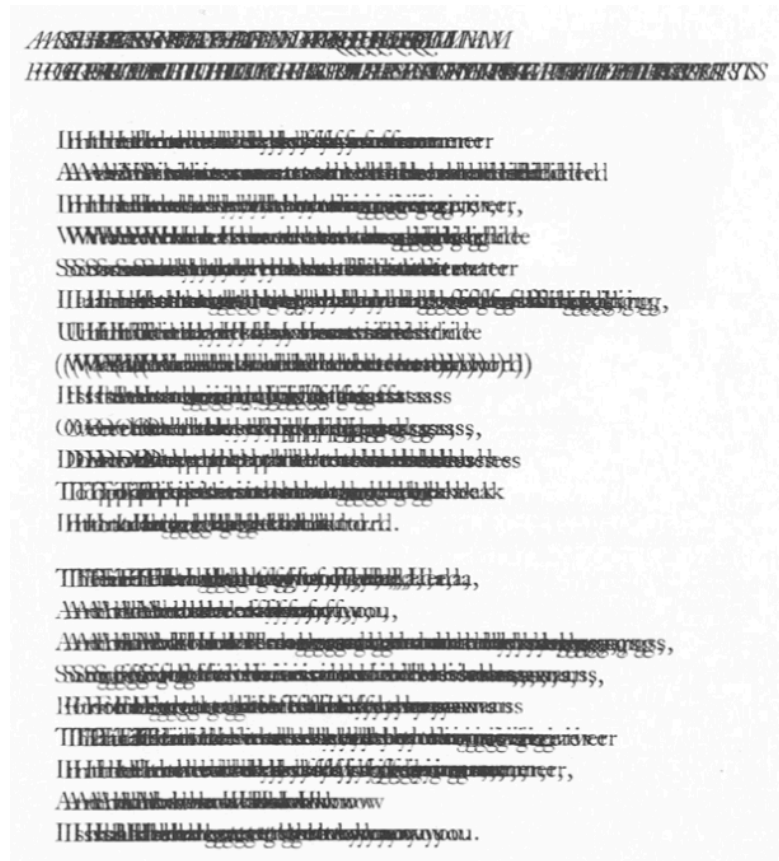


Figure 29: Rosmarie Waldrop, *Camp Printing* (1970)

It is of note that, though Waldrop's process emphasises materiality (or plasticity) in the written word, it is transitory and therefore does not entirely eradicate linguistic signification from its scales of transfiguration. The works come from and through language and even when illegible, as Lyotard suggests, the 'plastic line submits to linguistic usage, which grants it straightforward informational value... [from which] a script emerges'.⁴² The example in Figure 29 is the most illegible of Waldrop's experimentations with this poem. This is, as before, most true in the median zone where, at this stage, none of the constituent language is discernible as words. The highest identifiable graphemic mark is morphological and not syntactic. At this point, a normative 'reading' of the text is wholly

⁴² Ibid, p. 212.

unsatisfactory if the presupposition is that the language will operate as a transparent conduit. The example evidences the plasticity that demarcates the figural and sets it apart from the textual.

The quality of plasticity requires explanation, particularly concerning Lyotard's theorisation of the human beings' bodily response to the plastic object. For Lyotard, the figural stands in opposition to language and to the organising capacity of the linguistic system. When confronted with figural artworks, the perceiver experiences a moment of hesitation that is not required by the reading process. The hesitant moment is necessary in order to make the "never seen" become 'visible'.⁴³ Lyotard's distinction between the 'read' and the 'seen' has space as a central factorial. In the above example, a graphemic gesture has been made but its inscription is not legible. The object in Figure 29 dictates that the mode of perception shifts from reading to seeing. It is perceived via an engagement with the staging of the illegible and the abundance of marks that constitute the text's material componentry. The staging of the illegible occurs due to Waldrop's process of overprinting, which relocates the graphemic gesture such that it 'inscribes itself in plastic space'.⁴⁴ The graphemic gesture's inscription in plastic space displaces the presence of the 'highest degree of legibility' and replaces it with a 'graphic form' where 'energy [is] accumulated and expressed'.⁴⁵ The consequence is that the text in Figure 29 is no longer 'interlocutory'; rather, it possesses the 'transitive nature of spontaneous aesthetics [that occupies] figural space'.⁴⁶ This process occurs as an extension of

⁴³ Ibid, p. 212.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 206.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 210. Lyotard's use of 'graphic' here refers to the 'material' nature of the written word.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 208.

and concurrent to the modular propagation of prints that Waldrop makes upon the same page.

The overall consequence for the text is the somewhat abstract acquisition by the poems of what Lyotard terms a 'deep, place-making' plasticity that is the domain of the 'seen' object and not the 'read text'.⁴⁷ The occupation of a 'place' in figural space necessitates that the textual become an object that possesses its own materiality (plasticity). In this sense, the use of the illegible in poems by Waldrop in *Camp Printing* fractures the distinct opposition between the textual and the figural and her progressive process works to emphasise both the capacity of the graphemic mark to signify linguistically but also to constitute a figural capacity that draws from and resists the written material from which it is composed.

The following chapter considers more closely the collagic process, specifically in the book *Debths* by Howe. Howe's poems are collages of found materials and her processes are divergent and distinct from both Walker's and Waldrop's. An analysis of Howe's text reveals that the capacity textual superimposition has of obstructing the act of reading can be utilised as a creative device to stage the fallibility of the written word. The chapter considers further motivations for the use of textual superimposition and analyses the collagic function in the context of the archival mark and resistance.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 265.

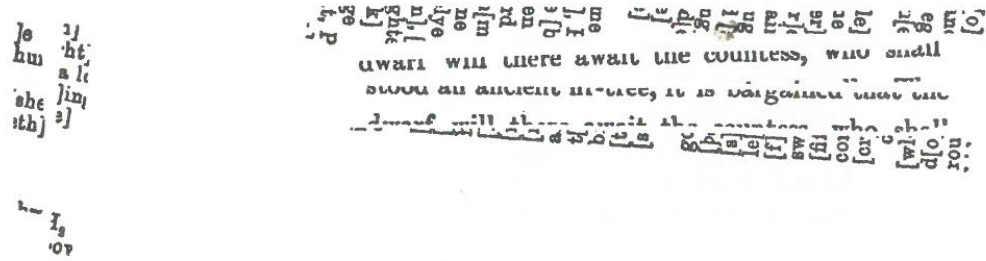


Figure 30. Susan Howe, *Debths*, p. 94.

As the concluding remarks of Chapter One make clear, a normative approach to the 'reading' of illegible text yields largely unsatisfactory results. In Chapter Two, the means by which illegible texts can be produced was explored and propositions made as to the consequences of this for the written word and the text. In this chapter, I move away from traditional notions of reading to address textual superimposition in the context of postmodernist theory. In particular, I draw from Derridean theorisations of the archive. I contextualise the collagic works of Howe with archival construction, maintenance and stewardship, and consider textual appropriation as a subversive act that challenges hierarchies of power and restores the subjugated voice. Additionally, I discuss collage as a means of resistance to Jean-Francois Lyotard's 'developmental human'. Lyotard speculates that humanity's ability to gain greater control over nature via developments in the techno-sciences (advances concerning In vitro fertilisation (IVF) provide a good example) has the converse effect of dehumanising the human being. The more power one has over the natural world, the less human

one becomes. I address textual superimposition as a mode of resisting the capitalist superstructures that enable the 'developmental human' as a means to resist dehumanisation in the individual.

Howe's collection *Debths* was published by New Directions in 2017.¹ The book is composed in five parts: a foreword followed by four sections of poetry. The poetry sections are further delineated into two categories: two sections of lyric poems, 'Titian Air Vent' and 'Periscope', and two sections of collaged poems, 'Tom Tit Tot' and 'Debths'. In the context of the following discussion I wish to qualify the word 'collage'. Etymologically, the word derives from the French *coller*, which means to glue or paste in place. Further to this, in a discussion on radical formalism, Craig Dworkin describes collage as the 'conjunction of elements from different registers'.² He continues to elaborate on the nature of the textual componentry of the collage, which he describes as 'scavenged, fragmented, and sutured language'.³ I work under the assumption that the collage is a textual assemblage consisting of materials from multiple pre-existing and appropriated sources.

Howe borrows the title of her volume from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a section of which she employs as an epigraph to the book: '*childlinen scarf to encourage his obsequies where he'd check their debths in that mormon's thames, be questing and handsetl, hop, step and a deepend, with his berths in their toiling moil*'.⁴ The quotation is useful in providing context for Howe's (after Joyce's)

¹ Susan Howe, *Debths*.

² Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 14.

³ Ibid, p. 19.

⁴ Howe, *Debths*, epigraph.

portmanteau. Dan Chiasson in *The New Yorker* describes the consequences of the linguistic anomaly in relation to time, mortality and chance error:

[The title is indicative of] the “depths” of her engagement with material traces of ideas (which often strand her in the literal depths of libraries and archives), and the “deaths” of parents and loved ones that have shaped Howe’s elegiac intensities. Also, it looks like a typo: here, as throughout her career, Howe is interested in the accidents, smudges, and tears that fasten works of literature to their material embodiments on the page. Correct that word in print, or read it aloud, and you lose not only its triplicate meanings but the implied relations among them.⁵

The substitution of the letter ‘p’ for ‘b’ produces a pun and Chiasson suggests the wordplay signals towards three further linguistic terms. This discussion addresses the formal composition of *Debths* and the poet’s poetics in relation to debt, depth and death. Howe constructs a situation where each of these words is considered in the context of one another.

Collage provides a mode by which the writer can collate the disparate vocality of the historical past, that which has been archived, where the act of producing the artefact is to converse with voices, and the accounts they give, that have laid dormant in the archive. However, Howe’s work in *Debths* must be read with the overt acknowledgment of the contrary decontextualizing effects of citation. Writing on this, Walter Benjamin says:

In the quotation that both saves and punishes, language proves the matrix of justice. It summons the word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely calls it back to its origin. It appears now... in the structure of a new text. In citation the two realms – of origin and destruction – justify themselves before language.⁶

⁵ Dan Chiasson, ‘Susan Howe’s Patchwork Poems’, *The New Yorker* [online]. Available from: <https://www.newyorker.com> [accessed 4 July 2018].

⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘Karl Kraus’, in *Selected Writings, Vol 2, 1927-1934*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press & Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 454.

Citation retains an echo of the original context as an augmenting component of the new text. Writers who explicitly engage with appropriation must recognise the tension present in the dualism of origin and destruction and must consider this transition when they seek to assimilate linguistic displacement and consummation. 'illu illu illu': one line from the first section of *Debths* provides catechismal, if not partial, explication of this process.⁷ Voices subject to archival darkness are illuminated by their appropriation but the process is fragmentary. Illegibility of materials sourced from the archive is revelatory of a poetics that places form as an extension of content: illegibility in the new text signals a loss of the primary context from where the language is derived.⁸

Furthermore, the tension of citation becomes integral to the poetics of the collagist. In the opening discussion to *Unoriginal Genius* (2010), Marjorie Perloff suggests that works such as Howe's *Debths* were produced in the context of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a text defined by its own partial construction from appropriated and modulated text.⁹ Although *The Waste Land* was an initiatory text in that Eliot's extensive use of citation proved a moment of conception for Modernist processes of appropriation and juxtaposition, Howe's work is more usefully considered alongside that of her contemporaries, particularly the Language Poets.¹⁰ Howe first published poetry in the early 1970s and was

⁷ Howe, *Debths*, p. 25.

⁸ Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', in *Collected Prose* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997), p. 240. It is in this essay that Charles Olson cites Robert Creeley as the source of the phrase: 'Form is never more than an extension of content'. Olson's own theorisations of the form/content dynamic, particularly in relation to the projective poem, find their foundation in Creeley's proposition.

⁹ Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 9.

¹⁰ Eliot's poem, published in the early 1920s, was contemporaneous with the latter days of both Cubism and Italian Futurism. Between 1912 and 1914, with Cubism in its synthetic stage, textual collage had become more prevalent in the work of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braques.

associated with poets such as Bernstein and Lyn Hejinian. At this time, her work could be characterised as possessing a 'deconstructionist attitude toward language, and disregard for conventional literary formalities'.¹¹ Her disregard for the conventional began with disruptions of linearity and experimental use of the page that 'challenge[d] [her] audience's reliance on the conventions of reading'.¹² However, her work took a marked turn in the late 1980s with the publication of *The Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (1987) and *Eikon Basilike* (1989). Those poems featured 'rotations and inverse mirrorings... [and] palimpsests which render some words entirely illegible'.¹³ Howe was not alone amongst her contemporaries as a collagic experimentalist. Also working with textual superimposition and illegibility at this time was Bernstein, whose publication *Veil* was published at a similar stage (see Figure 14).¹⁴ It is of note that the Language poets, whose poetics found their premise in linguistic 'transitions [and] transmutations', should extend beyond linear illustrations of these notions towards the disruptive field of the collagic plane.¹⁵

Perloff addresses appropriation and citation as central to the poesis of artificers such as Howe and Bernstein: '... it is important to note that the words, morphemes, syntactic units... have been *chosen* by the poet [which reveals] the primacy of the poet's *inventio* as constructive principle'.¹⁶ *Inventio* is a central device of rhetoric and the Latin translates as 'invention' or 'discovery'. Perloff

Futurist painters and poets such as Carlo Carrà and F. T. Marinetti were producing works which featured text as both printed and overprinted.

¹¹ *The Poetry Foundation* [online], Susan Howe (2019). Available from: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org> [accessed 4 July 2018].

¹² Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 32.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 32.

¹⁴ This work is also discussed in the taxonomy provided in the introductory chapter (p. 30).

¹⁵ Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Enquiry* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 1.

¹⁶ Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius*, p. 9.

notes the centrality of 'discovery' to the poet's *modus operandi*, particularly where citation comprises a part of that process. Howe engages with a poetics that takes advantage of the destructive nature of citation, where the partial cessation of an original context allows for the juxtaposition of appropriated language in new textual documents. Thus, in Howe's *Debths*, discovery is itself a mode of invention.

Additionally, as well as a formal indicator that the language of the collage is violently derived from an antecedent textual environment, illegibility is a correlative of the transition from a previous into a prevailing text. Craig Dworkin characterises this transition as the "'noise" of her [Howe's] difficult poetic', a noise exhibited in her work as superimposed and, at times, illegible text.¹⁷ Indeed, in the section 'Periscope' – itself a prototypical object for the subversive act of covert observation – Howe writes, 'network entanglements comma'.¹⁸ Here, Howe suggests that literary noise derives from the interweaving of information from multiple sources, the collaged poem itself a macro-matrix composed of the materials of a number of subsidiary networks. In this context noise is the biproduct of the 'potential [of superimposed and illegible text] to disrupt the message, to unsettle the code of the status quo'.¹⁹ Howe's collages are formal indicators of both the violence of citation and the splintered transmission of appropriated materials from source to textual terminus.

Indeed, the archive is itself defined in part by the violent nature of its production. Jacques Derrida describes archival violence as apparent at the

¹⁷ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 39.

¹⁸ Howe, *Debths*, p. 124.

¹⁹ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 39.

'originary and structural breakdown... of memory'.²⁰ The impetus to archive derives, he argues, from an aspiration to render legible a mark that signifies one's individual existence. This is an intransigent response on the part of the archivist to Sigmund Freud's notion that the human being has the 'compulsion to repeat' due a conservative character driven by a desire to preserve themselves.²¹ The compulsion is a fallible antithesis to death; when we archive we resist forgetting, where 'forgetting' is synonymous in Freudian discourse, with death. The archive is, therefore, fashioned by its creator as an idealised account, or, as Derrida puts it, 'a mask [drawn] right on the skin'.²² This suggests the archive shares with Howe's collages the characteristic of error. He continues to suggest that this feature of the archive generates a pledge as a 'token of the future'.²³ The difficulty here is that the archive becomes not an objectivised chronicle but a apotheosized simulacrum, a record not of what occurred but of what the archivist wishes to be remembered. This suggests a paradox at the foundation of the definition of the archive: the archive is manufactured to retain that which is lost to memory, but the process of compilation consists of the fracture of memory followed by the possibility of its improper reassembly.

Howe's use of the archive must be considered in the contemporary context within which *Debths* has been produced. As technologies have become more complex in their capacity to transmit and store ever-increasing levels of

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'Archive Fever', trans. by Eric Prenowitz, *Diacritics*, 25, 2 (summer 1995), 9-63 (p. 12).

²¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, trans. by Joan Reviere (London: The Hogarth Press, 1979), p.55.

²² Derrida, 'Archive Fever', p. 14.

²³ Ibid, p. 18.

data, the ‘dormant archivist in all of us’ has been awakened.²⁴ The concept of the archive as a centralised repository – one shepherded by ‘superior magistrates... those who command...’ – for that which is put ‘to press’, has been expanded to include the myriad of social media posts (and their subsequent deletions) that are published in the abstraction of the data cloud.²⁵ The archive has become increasingly democratised, its production a convenience for the masses. *Debths* is a reflection of this shift and the book’s component textual materials (sources that largely relate to Howe’s own geographical and historical heritage) indicate that archival exploration is now necessarily inclusive of autobiographical data as well as that recovered from the traditional, somewhat more static, archive. Derrida describes the derivation of the word ‘archive’ and suggests:

As is the case for the Latin *archivum* or *archium*... the meaning of “archive,” its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law.²⁶

The notion of the ‘archive’ is changing and its conception as a ‘building’ accessed by ‘those who commanded’ is an anachronism. Indeed, in the production of my project *Seized*, the composite materials were collected and catalogued by myself from easily accessible and open sources. The production of an archive can occur as a purposeful act by an individual for whom that archive serves a particular purpose. That the archive is the prerogative of a ruling class is a vestige of the pre-digital age.

²⁴ Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (Chichester, NY: Colombia University Press, 2011), p. 188.

²⁵ Derrida, ‘Archive Fever’, p. 13.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 9-10.

Howe's mode of collagic composition in *Debths* necessitates the total obscuration of some of the constituent language, such that the process – the unearthing of her hidden literary documentation – and the product – the collage – possess a concurrent signature. But as I have said, the historical account the archive proports to provide is unreliable. This offers a motivation for undertaking textual superimposition as a formal process: illegibility is not only a formal characteristic of the collage, but also of the archive. Illegibility restricts linguistic signification in collage as discriminatory selection of information does so in the archive. Again, the form of the textually superimposed collage behaves as an extension of the source of its content. Also, the shift of context in citation produces an irony in Howe's work. The obstruction of linguistic signification occurs because of collage, but also as a consequence of the stewardship of the archive, compiled as it is as an idealised account that minimises (makes illegible) a proper report.

With these complexities of the archive stated, it is relevant to explore the notion that writers are indebted to the historical figures that comprise their historical landscapes. This includes deceased relatives from whom the living often derive a quantity of their autobiographical archival materials. Howe's work in *Debths* acts as a measure of the geographical diversity of her lineal ancestry.²⁷ Howe comes from 'an artistic, intellectual family, [her] mother Mary Manning was an actress and her father a law professor at Harvard'.²⁸ Howe describes how she has 'always felt a tremendous pull between Ireland and America' due to her

²⁷ Chiasson, *Patchwork Poems*.

²⁸ *The Poetry Foundation* [online], 'Susan Howe'.

mother being Irish and her father a Bostonian.²⁹ Mary Manning performed under the direction of W. B. Yeats as a child and became a playwright herself in adulthood. Howe's sister, Fanny Howe, is a successful poet, novelist and writer of short stories. Describing her recollection of time spent in Ireland as a young child, Howe says: 'I have only shadow memories under the surface of family photographs'.³⁰ The ephemerality of these recollections is indicative of, as Derrida states, the ease of forgetting that catalyses the production of the archive. The following illustration from 'Tom Tit Tot' is indicative:

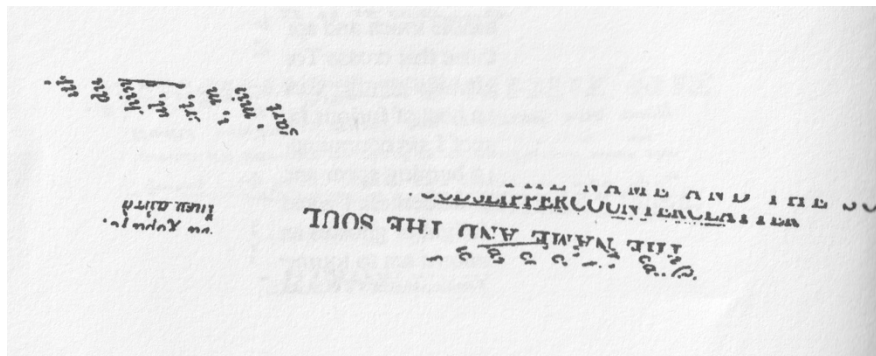


Figure 31. Susan Howe, *Debths*, p. 96.

Derrida's suggestion that the archival gesture is catalysed by a 'destructive drive: a drive, thus, of loss' is somewhat paraphrased in this example.³¹ The excerpt contains the partly obscured line 'THE NAME AND THE SOUL'. The two words, 'name' and 'soul' are nominal analogies for 'life' and 'death'. Archivisation occurs in life as a signal designed to persist in death and this tension is demarcated in the passage. Collage is a mode by which the materials of the archivist can be

²⁹ Maureen N. McLane, 'The Art of Poetry No. 97: Susan Howe', *The Paris Review*, 203 (Winter 2012), pp. 144-169, (p. 147).

³⁰ McLane, *The Paris Review*, p. 149.

³¹ Derrida, 'Archive Fever', p. 13.

subsequently interrogated. The partial superimposition in the example acts as a formal extension of the process by which, as Derrida proposes, the archivist manufactures their own mask.

In the preface, Howe offers contextualising accounts of formative experiences that informed the book's inception and production. These introductory pages reveal the memories of childhood adventure to be the foundation of her poetic experimentations. Visitations to 'Little Sir Echo Camp' are recalled, the summer camp in the 'foothills of New Hampshire' to which her parents 'packed' her off, age eight.³² To have been 'packed' off is in a sense to have been forgotten and these recollections account for her sensitivity to absence. Howe's solitariness and the expansive nature of the landscape was amplified by an echo that 'bounces off the surrounding White Mountains'.³³ The whiteness of the mountains that Howe recollects recalls in turn the whiteness of the blank page. When one considers the aesthetic of the collagic elements in *Debths*, defined as they are by the nucleation of superimposed and illegible text, it becomes clear that the blankness of Howe's pages become the site at which she arranges and dramatizes her 'disruptive visual prosody'.³⁴

Additionally, the notion of the 'echo' is persistent throughout the text. The preface begins with reference to the song 'Little Sir Echo' by Bing Crosby. Howe quotes the lyrics '*Going Back! Going Back!*' followed by the reiterative 'Hello! (Hello!) Hello! (Hello!)'.³⁵ The catechistic chant alludes to a dialogue not dissimilar to that which Howe seeks to engage in with her collages, detecting and

³² Howe, *Debths*, p. 9.

³³ Ibid, p. 9.

³⁴ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 38.

³⁵ Howe, *Debths*, p. 9.

tracing the textual and biographical echoes of the past as materials for her poems. The collage is the textual consummation of Howe's perceptibility to the echo (where the echo is the archival mark). That is to say, the obfuscated transmission of archival language (the echo) is analogised by the collagic process of superimposition and its illegible consequence in her poems. The collages can be considered compilations of echoes, the written language of the archival mark Howe's material.

Debths dialogues with figures of the past. These figures have their own narratives and many of their stories concern discourses conducted across time, whether through literature or, as in one case, mediumship. Howe participates in these conversations, collecting and compiling their constitutive voices into poems that evoke otherwise ephemeral temporal relations. She provides the example of Leonora Piper, a 'famous Boston Medium', who, in the Autumn of 1889, held discussions with other Bostonians concerning her 'trance-talk' with long-dead American natives.³⁶ Also cited is Mary Rowlandson, a resident of Lancaster, MA, and the author of an 'American Captivity Narrative'.³⁷ Mary's story tells of the plight of a woman and her three children, seized by Amerindians during King Philip's War and held captive before being ransomed back to their family.³⁸ Such narratives are typical in Howe's work; her oeuvre is suffused with texts that interrogate 'received perspectives and centers of power' and her

³⁶ Ibid, p. 11.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 18.

³⁸ Mary Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty & Goodness of God, Together, with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Library, 2004).

method has been an attempt at the restoration of 'traditionally neglected positions'.³⁹

Textual superimposition and illegibility in this work indicate the forfeiture of detail consequent of the writer taking up the position of 'a transitional figure' acting as mediator between 'past and present' but also the powerful and the powerless.⁴⁰ Partiality of voice becomes the material fragments of her collages, the harvesting of those materials the nexus of her poetic process. Dworkin describes this as Howe's "'reading through" source texts', an approach that reminds us that 'language is always reflected and refracted through other points of view'.⁴¹ In this sense, the echo referred to in the introductory pages of *Debths* is an analogy for the transience of narratives lost to time and the difficulty of identifying and engaging with such narratives in the present.

However, the passage of an extended period is not a prerequisite for creative production. Howe's discovery of textual material occurs at times in the wake of great emotional trauma. After the sudden passing of her husband, Peter Hare, Howe entered the archive, sought out the 'closed book', and began to compose collages.⁴² When Howe says 'in times of... crisis a door is opened to a place where facts and apparitions mix', she suggests that personal loss can be a catalyst for creative activity and the key that unlocks the door that separates the artist from the creative space.⁴³ This is a further example of the relationship

³⁹ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 38. Marjorie Perloff echoes this in *Radical Artifice* (p. 51) in a discussion of Howe's 1987 collection *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*. There she states that [the book] draws its materials... from historical and literary documents, from archives and letters... [which become] the subject of the poet's meditation on power and marginality'.

⁴⁰ Chiasson, *Patchwork Poems*.

⁴¹ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 38.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 101.

⁴³ McClane, *The Paris Review*, p. 158.

Debths has with Derrida's proposition that the archive and its assembly grows out of a fear of death.⁴⁴ Indeed, one snatch of discernible language from the collaged section of *Debths* titled 'TOM TIT TOT' exclaims, 'The people of the coming times will know'.⁴⁵ The example is provided below:

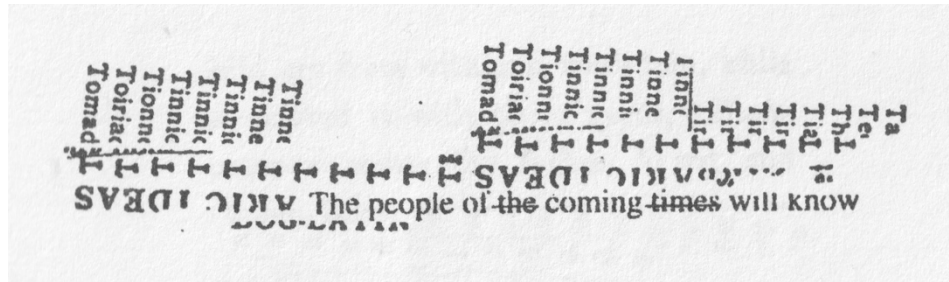


Figure 32. Susan Howe, *Debths*, p. 55.

The modal auxiliary 'will' is used in the simple future and is conjugated for the third person plural. The declaration expresses a determination to ensure the transference of knowledge to a succeeding group of people. It is a statement catalysed by the death drive, by the fear of being forgotten, the fear of loss. There is an irony in Howe's placement of this appropriated text in the obscured conditions of the textually superimposed collage. The discovery and recovery of the text, as well as the mode of composition, dictates that the composite materials are lacerated, wrenched from context and assembled abstrusely, such that the larger part of the text is illegible: it is unknown. The illegible text is unknown in a different way to the text that is yet to be found in the archive. It is present and yet strangely absent, which provides Howe's collage with a haunting quality.

⁴⁴ Derrida, 'Archive Fever', p. 13.

⁴⁵ Howe, *Debths*, p. 55.

Debths displays intertextuality, dialogues conducted across texts of different time periods, as a central concern. Howe alludes to William Austin's *Peter Rugg, The Missing Man* (1824-1827), a short story that tells the tale of a man caught in liminal space, both geographically and temporally, having taken the decision in bad weather to reject shelter and travel home.⁴⁶ He never arrives. For decades afterwards he is seen with his young child on the roads and tracks of New England, his horse-drawn cart pursued perpetually by a dreadful storm. Sightings of the man and his daughter become themselves an indeterminate mythological collage. Howe suggests that these stories anticipated later works such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story 'Wakefield', collected in *Twice-Told Tales* (1837), which begins, perhaps typically, given Howe's penchant for the archive, 'In some old magazine or newspaper I recollect a story, told as truth, of a man – let us call him Wakefield...'.⁴⁷ The suggestion of authenticity in this opening line recalls Derrida's suggestion that the archival mark is contrived and therefore spurious. This provides a motive for Howe's use of collage as a method of interrogation of the veracity of antiquated archival texts. The narrative tells the story of a man, the eponymous Wakefield, who deserts his wife and detaches himself from society. The decades erode any remembrance of his existence until he seeks to return to his former life to find nothing left for him but death. Wakefield's desertion strips him of his humanity and hastens his removal from living memory. In a sense, the tale is cautionary. It suggests that self-effacement from the task of compiling one's own archive has the consequence of eradicating

⁴⁶ William Austin, 'Peter Rugg: The Missing Man' (2015), *Bartleby* [online]. Available from: <https://www.bartleby.com/400/prose/752.html> [accessed 18 December 2018].

⁴⁷ Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'Wakefield', in *Twice Told Tales* (New York, Modern Library: 2001), pp. 97-105 (p.97).

totally one's epistolary account. As a result, the moment at which the archive should become useful, at the 'originary and structural breakdown... of memory', it fails.⁴⁸ The citation of these works indicates that Howe's use of collage is embedded in an exploration of both visual representation *and* de-representation.⁴⁹ Take the example below, a prototypical facsimile of a collage that provides clues as to the presence of illegibility in the work:

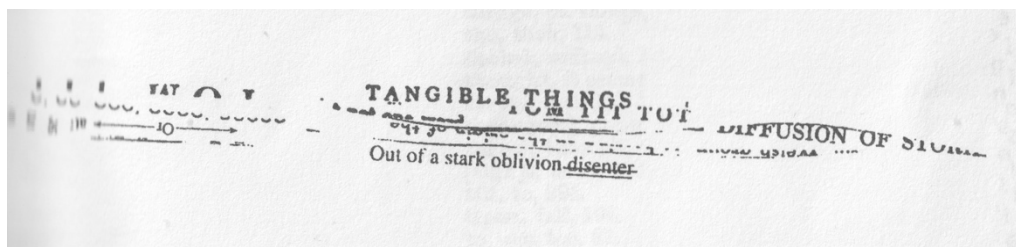


Figure 33. Susan Howe, *Debths*, p. 47.

The amalgam of archival materials converges in her work such that the superimposed areas are as conspicuous in their obscurity as the visible areas are in their perceivability. The example contains the line 'Out of a stark oblivion ~~disenter~~'.⁵⁰ The line seems, in its legibility, to call attention to the illegible areas of the text, those that are not quite 'TANGIBLE THINGS'.⁵¹ Here, collage measures the dynamic between that which is preserved and that which is not preserved. The collage is a mode of documenting that dynamism and illegibility in the poems is an intimation towards that which is erased at the failure of memory.

⁴⁸ Derrida, 'Archive Fever', p. 12.

⁴⁹ Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius*, p. 100.

⁵⁰ Howe, *Debths*, p. 47.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.47.

Howe's experimentations with collage suggest that the poetic artefact is a site where sensory limitation can be overcome. This supposed function leads me to argue that the collage is a site of resistance. Towards this proposition, I draw on Jean-François Lyotard's notion of the 'developmental inhuman', as described in the text *The Inhuman*.⁵² Lyotard defines the developmental human as the systematic progress of the scientific and technological fields. This evolution is coterminous with an increase in the power of the human being, particularly political and economic, and particularly over matter. Lyotard argues that this is useful for the enablement of prosperity in a capitalist society, where one's ability to produce desirable materials premises one's economic success. According to Lyotard, the corollary of this progress is to make the human being proprietor of the natural world, which, he suggests, is an example of the human being behaving in an inhuman capacity.

Lyotard insists that the inhuman nature of the system 'rather has the consequence of causing the forgetting of what escapes it', retaining only that which 'is useful afterwards'.⁵³ A consequence of this is the production of an urgency that instigates loss for the individual.⁵⁴ From his position as an advocate of the postmodern position, Lyotard applies the term 'anamnesis' to describe a process of resistance premised upon explicit recollection. During a discussion

⁵² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 2-3.

⁵³ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, pp. 2-3.

⁵⁴ Allen W. Wood, *Karl Marx*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 3-4. There are echoes here of Marx's concept of alienation. Marx suggests that the worker is deprived of or alienated from the products they produce, the environment in which they produce them, and the processes by which they produce. The categorizing effect of delineating functions to the human being within an overarching structure has the consequence of alienating the individual from that structure. The citizen is thus alienated from society and experienced as an alien.

with Jean Baudrillard, Lyotard contextualised his own position in relation to his contemporary and explained:

I think what is necessary for thought today requires the exact opposite of the urgency that is imposed upon us; and that is taking your time, letting things take some time, losing time. This is constitutive of all reflection and essential to the activity of thought; it is called "anamnesis." Time is lost. This activity is indispensable, at least for trying, not to understand, but to retain and bring back what is forgotten in the rush. Your entire discourse seems to me to be moving toward one prescription: 'Let us forget and let us do so as quickly as possible.' I feel I must offer resistance to your discourse; just as I think there is a secret region of possible resistance to speed. I think it is very important not to forget.⁵⁵

The dismissal of anamnesis forms a part of the techno-science's *modus operandi* in the quest for that which is not aesthetically beautiful but technologically or scientifically efficient. Techno-science does produce its own archive. However, the contents are utilitarian in that they are comprised exclusively of information that may prove advantageous or profitable in future contexts. Lyotard argues that the human being is swept along by this process and as a result are themselves, incrementally but actually, made inhuman. Howe's extensive use of the archive and collage provides a means of countering Lyotard's 'developmental' process. In the mining of the archive, the writer resists the failure of memory and overcomes systemic amnesia. This process premises the production and subsequent perception of the aesthetic artefact.⁵⁶ Howe's collages stage what Perloff describes as the writer's 'inventio', Howe's constructive principle. The form also indicates that resistance to the 'developmental' process, to its capacity

⁵⁵ Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Lectures and discussions by J.-F. Lyotard, J. Baudrillard et al. at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, 1988, with a summary in English'. In *Kunstens og filosofiens værker efter emancipationen (Works of Art and Philosophy after the Emancipation)*, ed. by E.M. Bukdahl and Carsten Juhl (Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, 1988), p. 41.

⁵⁶ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 2.

to compel the ‘forgetng [of] human words’, is at once a necessary but fallible pursuit.⁵⁷

The pursuit calls into question the function of art in the context of society and recalls Allen Fisher’s description of the relationship between the artist and the perceiver as a cooperative rather than an autocracy. In ‘The poetics of decoherence and the imperfect fit’, he writes:

Art production involves two processes. The first is the facture by the artist. The second is the aesthetic reception when patterns of connectedness are discovered within the work and in the comprehension of the receiver (the reader, viewer, listener).⁵⁸

Fisher infers that the production of meaning depends upon a cooperative comprised of the artist and the receiver, without this unified approach ‘patterns of connectedness’ in the artefact fail to materialise. The collagic process undertaken by Howe further complicates this dynamic. This is due to a tension present between poiesis on the one hand and collage as product on the other. Howe’s method of discovery, the unearthing of materials from the archival context, is in discordance with the textually superimposed and at times illegible collages her processes produce. Howe utilises illegibility in her collages as a somewhat ironic indicator that the ‘language’ of art has a reduced capacity to ‘say’ something in the modern world. In the facsimile below, for example, the partially-hidden words ‘alphabet’ and ‘obscures’ emanate from otherwise superimposed and largely illegible language:

⁵⁷ Howe, *Debths*, p. 59.

⁵⁸ Allen Fisher, ‘The Poetics of Decoherence and the Imperfect Fit’, in *Atlantic Drift*, ed. by James Byrne and Robert Sheppard (Todmorden: Arc, 2017), p. 76.

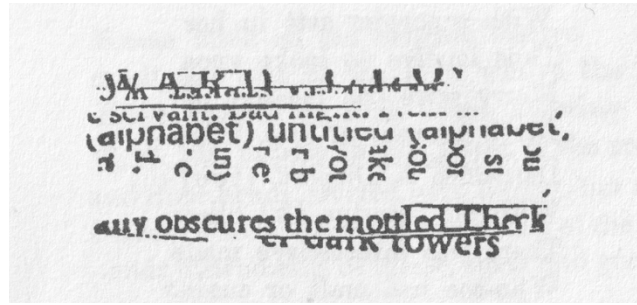


Figure 34. Susan Howe, *Debths*, p. 62.

Howe's Work in *Debths* addresses the difficulty of overcoming forgetting. She paraphrases a section of the Bible in which an impossible imperative is given by God to Moses, 'Strike the rock, water will come out of it for the people to drink'.⁵⁹ In the story from Exodus, the rock is mediator between the Israelites and the water required to keep them from death.⁶⁰ The image reveals the symmetry between drawing water from a smitten stone and bringing materials lost to history into present exhibition. As a part of her process, Howe must gather and prepare hitherto unknown or forgotten materials and place these fragments into the collage in order to bring 'to light what has long been hidden' but in the knowledge that the new document will have a limited impact on the psyche of modern society.⁶¹

In terms of form, the collage superimposes text and compels it to illegibility as a dramatization of Benjamin's proposition that citation 'wrenches... [text] destructively from its context'.⁶² Dworkin describes Howe's collagic aesthetic as an 'unconventional' reapplication of found materials, but this underplays the gravity of collage as a poetic in which form constructs meaning

⁵⁹ Howe, *Debths*, p. 22.

⁶⁰ Exodus 17. 6.

⁶¹ Howe, *Debths*, p. 18.

⁶² Benjamin, 'Karl Kraus', p. 454.

for the content. Citation is a process of recovery as well as one of destruction and the collage is the confluence at which the dialectic of recovery and destruction coincide. The convolution of realities examined in Howe's work occurs via the 'means' of form as textual superimposition complicates the archival narrative. Not only this, but collagic form provides Howe's examinations with a 'meaning' they would lack if presented in an alternative fashion.⁶³ In this sense, the paradoxical capacity of collage to both obscure and stage recovered text; bringing into the light archival materials that were 'lost in the past: absent', but also repositioning them in new but esoteric texts, is an analogy for the function of art.⁶⁴

Also, the experience of unearthing, of recovering, the materials is in itself a dissident activity. Howe describes 'lurking' in libraries 'as opposed to 'looking', the search subversive in its revelation of the 'spurned book'.⁶⁵ The insubordinate nature of resistance, the defiance of forgetting, is described by Howe as 'civilly disobedient telepathy'.⁶⁶ The consequence of such insubordinate behaviour is the discovery and rescue of 'the hidden [text]'.⁶⁷ In describing her work as 'civilly disobedient', Howe suggests that her process is characterised by its subversion of social norms; that the collection of archival materials for artistic purpose resists submission to Lyotard's developmental inhuman, that it destructs the archive.

⁶³ Sheppard, *The Meaning of Form*, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 9.

⁶⁵ McLane, *The Paris Review*, p. 155.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 155.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 155.

This recalls Debord's proposition that the abstraction of society is a 'rotten superstructure' constituent of human beings but not subject to total control.⁶⁸ Goldsmith observes that Debord and his contemporaries sought to reclaim autonomy in the individual via the production of 'interventions [that] were intended to be a catalyst for social change'.⁶⁹ This infers a struggle with an overarching social superstructure with which the individual must grapple for a self-determinative individualism.

However, Howe also suggests that the beneficiaries of her process extend to the human beings that, as individuals, form the membership of larger society. Howe's work in this sense shares some similarities with that of the Internationale Situationniste [The Situationists] (IS), who engaged in what Craig Dworkin describes as an oppositional 'theory and praxis of micropolitical activity that... extend[s] to all aspects of everyday life'.⁷⁰ The Situationists were cofounded by Debord, an antiauthoritarian with a tendency towards political autonomy for the individual, but its origins can be traced back to Letterism, Imaginist Bauhaus, and CoBrA.⁷¹ Debord's founding manifesto 'Report on the Construction of Situations' (1957) outlined a desire for action and for change.⁷² Similarities to Lyotard's 'developmental inhuman' emerge in the opening sentences of Debord's argument:

A society's "culture" both reflects and prefigures its possible ways of organizing life. Our era is characterized by the lagging of revolutionary

⁶⁸ Guy Debord, 'Report on the Construction of Situations' (2014), *The Anarchist Library* [online]. Available from: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org> [accessed 2 August 2018].

⁶⁹ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, p. 36.

⁷⁰ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 5.

⁷¹ Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 235.

⁷² Debord, *Report on the Construction of Situations*, p. 3.

political action behind the development of modern possibilities of production which call for a more advanced organization of the world.⁷³

Debord's 'development of modern possibilities of production' parallels Lyotard's 'developmental inhuman'. Debord suggests too that those forces pushing towards 'more advanced organization of the world' are disproportionately powerful in comparison to 'lagging... revolutionary political action'.⁷⁴ The advancement of the techno-sciences is characterised by an impetus intractable to the individual and Debord's retaliatory methodology consists of several approaches. Chief among these is the *détournement*, a concerted radical application of the forces of capitalism against themselves. This relates largely to what Debord termed the spectacle, or the mass media, which he believed was an apparatus of control in modern western societies.⁷⁵ The methods of the IS sought to claw back and retain autonomy, and the *dérive* is a case in point. The process concerns the movement throughout a landscape (typically urban) but with no predetermined course of action. Similarly, as a site of resistance, Howe's collages perform a function parallel to the *dérive*. Entering the archive, pursuing its contents, and engaging in anamnesis subverts the capitalist initiative and recovers, however indeterminately, an individual's self-determinative authority.

There is however, a potentially paradoxical state of affairs, a conflict between collage as resistance to material development when collage is itself built

⁷³ Ibid, p. 4.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 4.

⁷⁵ Other retaliatory methodologies include the integration of the artistic and social domains via the construction of situations, the purpose of which is to unshackle the behaviours of everyday life from the capitalist forces operating upon them. The construction of situations contains the notion of the *dérive*, which entails a resistance to architectural modes of controlling the behaviour of individuals via the undertaking of transgressional journeys. In other words, the Situationist allows themselves to be drawn through the urban landscape without the objectivity of a predetermined scheme of manoeuvre.

from the material of language. Craig Dworkin addresses this in *Reading the Illegible* where he describes the ‘inhumanness of language’.⁷⁶ He writes:

The ideal of a “perfect” language, one operating exophorically to communicate a “content” of purely referential signifieds, would depend [...] on the absolute transparency of the medium: not just the “disappearance of the word” into a “blank page,” but ultimately the disappearance of even that page itself. As the material of the medium asserts itself with an increasingly intrusive opacity, the exophoric possibilities diminish in proportion.⁷⁷

Dworkin proposes that language exists in a state of fluctuation between two qualities: materiality and transparency (where absolute transparency or materiality is illusory). This balance makes impracticable a context where language becomes wholly transparent or otherwise. Textual superimposition is a formal node of this dichotomy. Given that the materiality of the medium necessarily imposes itself, it may be useful to see materiality as not an obstruction to the exploration of ‘signs along routes of signification’, but as enabling of ‘alternate strategies’ of investigation.⁷⁸ Howe’s texts are, therefore, intended for both ‘reading’ (in the traditional sense) and for ‘seeing’, where ‘seeing’ is an alternate mode by which to negotiate of the form of the text.

It is useful to consider *Debths* as an artefact that uses textual superimposition and illegibility to explore the politics of silence. However, Dworkin characterises Howe’s earlier work such as *Eikon Basilike* (1989) as tentative in its use of illegibility. He describes how superimposed text ‘threatens (or promises) to become illegible’ and this suggests that, in earlier writings, Howe managed

⁷⁶ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 71.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 72.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 73.

carefully the use of textual superimposition and as such its production of illegibility is limited in scale.⁷⁹ The example below is indicative:

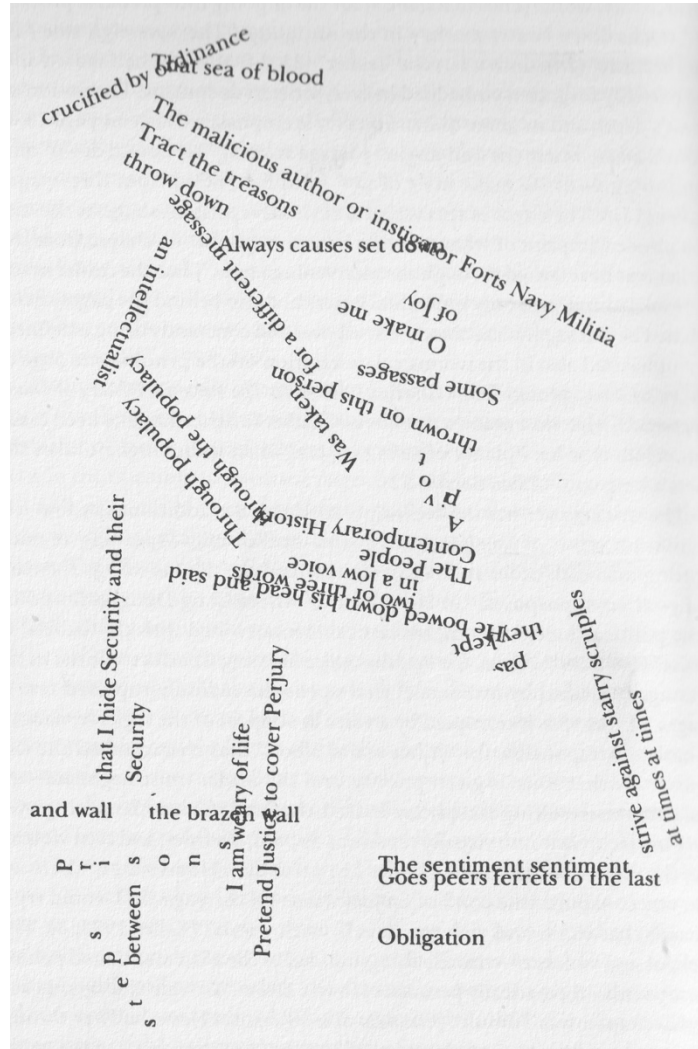


Figure 35. Susan Howe, *Eikon Basilike*, p. 14.

The poet has used the space of the page here more liberally, the text spread over a larger area rather than nucleated in a single, smaller zone. The mode of superimposition differs too. The process here is similar to that of Walker in *Condensations*. The layers of the collage are transparent such that the text in the

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 31.

lower layers remains visible. In *Depths* this is not the case as the layers retain their opacity, concealing completely the text of the lower layers. In the example above, where the text becomes illegible it is possible to infer what letter or letters have been obscured via the context of the legible areas in the immediate vicinity.

Eikon Basilike finds its premise in the seventeenth-century trials of Anne Hutchinson and Charles I. Hutchinson was found guilty of heresy and sentenced to banishment; the king of treason and sentenced to death. Manuscripts from both trials reveal that the defendants were silenced upon sentencing, refused the right to speak. Rachael Tzvia Back concludes that the prosecutors in both cases made use of 'silencing tactics' to prevent protestations about courtroom procedure, thus 'eradicating the other's language altogether'.⁸⁰ Prosecutors used Hutchison's stillborn and deformed baby, and the contents of Charles' book *Eikon Basilike: The Portraicture of His Sacred Majestie in His Solitudes and Sufferings* (1649), as post-trial confirmations of their dissembling. The authorship of the book is contested and the 'imperfect and scattered material' that comprises its pages foundations Howe's response to the events in her own *Eikon Basilike*.⁸¹ Dworkin remarks that Howe's work at this time does 'not constitute a guide to greater syntactic clarity or a score for performance', inferring that the function of superimposition in Howe's texts is to dramatize visual prosody, the consequence of which is to communicate also the text's lack of readability and/or performativity.⁸²

⁸⁰ Rachel Tzvia Back, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), p. 125.

⁸¹ Francis Madan, *A New Bibliography of the Eikon Basilike* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 150.

⁸² Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 34.

In *Debths* however, illegibility interferes with the communicative process such that textual superimposition becomes a formal demonstration of the politics of silence. Dworkin explains that:

[Howe's] fragmented pages participate in the very processes of violence which they critique, they graphically enact the destructive and deconstructive elements of her project with a visual foregrounding that forces the reader to confront these themes... Moreover, Howe's radically disrupted page situates its readers in a position from which they might more empathetically respond to the issues of power... [and] violence'.⁸³

Howe's collages precipitate a formal approach to the theme of violence and particularly that violence associated with the erasure in writing of the repressed voice. Howe addresses power and violence overtly in the book *The Europe of Trusts* (1990). The prose introduction declares: 'Malice dominates the history of Power and Progress'.⁸⁴ The statement addresses the speechlessness of the powerless and accounts for the violent and destructive nature of Howe's process. Illegibility indicates a failure of communicability and as such is representative of the forfeiture of power. To observe Howe's collection of collages in *Debths* is to enter into her fractious discussion of these themes. The destruction of voice recalls Derrida's proposition that the archive is an unstable repository for textual evidence. In this case, it is not on account of the archivist contriving a favourable archival account, rather, it is due to the partial destruction of the archive via the silencing of an individual. This is equally apparent in Howe's destabilised application of archival materials in the collage.

⁸³ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, pp. 37-38.

⁸⁴ Susan Howe, *The Europe of Trusts: Selected Poems* (Los Angeles, CA: Sun and Moon Press, 1990), p. 11.

Goldsmith identifies instability in the work of other experimental writing from which parallels can be drawn. He suggests that 'by atomizing words, across a page, coupled with disrupting normative modes of syntax' the Language Poets sought to motivate the reader to 'reconstruct the text as they saw fit'.⁸⁵ Such an invitation constructs a 'nonhierarchical linguistic landscape' that encourages the production of meaning via association between the constituent parts.⁸⁶ Perloff notes the parallelism between Howe's visual prosody and Language poetry, remarking that, as Avant-Gardes, they each promote 'chance operations' and therefore an indefiniteness of authorship.⁸⁷ If meaning is to be derived from the collage, it must not be reliant upon syntactic integrity or legibility. Instead, it is Howe's ability to 'challenge [her] audience's conventions of reading... by eliminating the very directional axes on which those conventions are based' that invites her audience to construct meaning via other means.⁸⁸ It is important to remember that whilst Howe does provide in the foreword to *Debths* an indication as to the origin of the constituent textual material, there is no comprehensive (bibliographic) account as to those sources. The vagueness of voice commences at the singularity of appropriation and extends into the composition phase and, therefore, into the final form of the work.

Craig Dworkin also disaffiliates Howe's earlier work in *The Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (1987) and *Eikon Basilike* (1989) from that of, for example, the Italian Futurists. This is due to an absence in Howe's work of the varied

⁸⁵ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, p. 153. Although, Allen Fisher's use of the word 'construct' is more useful in this context. The receiver is not required to reconstruct the collage as if the work were a jigsaw puzzle with a final, definitive form and interpretation.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 153.

⁸⁷ Perloff, *Radical Artifice*. P. 173.

⁸⁸ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 32.

political oppression and struggle are explored via textual superimposition and, particularly, illegibility. The dissection of the written word in the collage becomes the formal representation of the disruption of the communication of 'noises at the margins'.⁹¹ However, collage's capacity to provide a 'record of violence' is a relatively simple example of form as an iconic representation of content and this belies a more complex, and socially significant, function of the collage. Dworkin suggests that illegibility possesses the greater potential to act as a potent gesture. This gesture disrupts the hierarchies that underpin the perpetration of political violence by unsettling those who control the production of archival documentation.⁹² The noise of her collages is a satirisation of the 'babble' of the political voice of the powerful.⁹³ In doing this, the works pose an active resistance to the structures that promote the suppression of the voices of the powerless.

The visual prosodics of the collagic artefact resist coherence of meaning and the arrival at a final interpretation. As was demonstrated during an attempted naturalisation of illegible graphemes in Chapter One, when language is superimposed and illegible, it is not possible to read and interpret its meaning. Similarly, Goldsmith describes how a succession of digital marks catalogued by social media users generates a disparate autobiographical account that encourages the reader 'to connect the dots and construct narratives in a plethora of ways'.⁹⁴ The accumulated sediment of the digital archive that Goldsmith highlights shares the same characteristic with the superimposed sediment of the textual collage. However, where the digital archive provides the opportunity to

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 39.

⁹² Howe, *The Europe of Trusts*. p. 11.

⁹³ Ibid, p. 40.

⁹⁴ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, p. 188-9.

move through seemingly unending information, Howe's collages in *Debths* subject their source materials, mined as they are from the vastness of the archive, to a process of nucleation. Here, form in the text is an act of compression that extracts noise from the archive and concentrates it to increased levels of activity. The constraints of textual superimposition and illegibility produce a dynamism in the text such that noise is both an indicator of our 'obsession with detail' but also our inability to tune into and contextualise that detail due to its vastness. Therein lies a formal tension in the collage, which seeks to attenuate noise as a mode of exploring its immeasurability.

These sentiments echo that of Lyn Hejinian, who, in the essay 'The Rejection of Closure', argues that the 'open' text resists singularity of meaning by providing conditions where 'all the elements of the work are maximally excited'.⁹⁵ She continues to explain this function in the context of the text's constituent material and says, 'here it is because ideas and things exceed (without deserting) argument that they have taken into the dimension of the work'.⁹⁶ Hejinian's argument parallels that of Benjamin in that she suggests that citation can enrich the new text as it contains both an aspect of the original source but also the opportunity to produce new meaning in the new context. However, we cannot consider this dynamic without paying attention to the augmenting and enabling function of form. As the collage stages cited materials it provides the conditions through which 'visual layout situates the reader in a position which simulates that of the poem's subject: the roving librarian'.⁹⁷ The reader is invited

⁹⁵ Lyn Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure' (2009), *The Poetry Foundation* [online]. Available from: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org> [accessed 24 December 2018].

⁹⁶ Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure'.

⁹⁷ Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 42.

to make connections between fragmentary language in much the same way as the librarian/archivist does. Form here provides the reader with autonomy, but it also provides the parameters within which language itself is negotiated. The navigation of superimposed and at times illegible language in the collage requires that we negotiate the form of the text, traverse its gullies, bridge its gaps. Susan J. Wolfson describes this process as 'reading for form' with a 'freedom from program and manifesto', which describes succinctly the co-dependent dynamic between the text and the reader.⁹⁸ If the 'closed' text makes no demands of the reader in the production of meaning, the open text becomes meaningful only as a consequence of the reader entering into a process of meaning production.

The forming of the text is premised on the perception of its constituent parts and the subsequent identification of connections between those parts. Perloff insists that it is the artificer that constructs the conditions within which this process can take place.⁹⁹ In the eighteenth century, Edmund Burke addresses perception and aesthetic response in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). He argues that the responsibility of the artificer is to seek balance in the scale of the object during its construction. He writes:

A true artist should put a generous deceit on the spectators, and effect the noblest designs by easy methods. [...] A good eye will fix the medium betwixt an excessive length, or height [...] and a short or broken quantity; and perhaps it might be ascertained to a tolerable degree of exactness¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown, eds. *Reading for Form* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2006), p. 5.

⁹⁹ Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁰ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 62-63.

The collagic process produces from a compendium of materials an artefact of limited scale. The pleasure of perception of the collage originates not from an expectation of a totality of experience, derived via the legibility of syntactically coherent language. Rather, it is from the degree to which the collage provides the potential for autonomous insight in the perceiver. Insight in this sense is enabled via the negotiation of the broken quantities of the collage's constituent materials. I return to Allen Fisher's statement of poetics, which addresses the consequences of the interrelation between the artist and the perceiver:

There are two alternative outcomes: one proposes a perfect fit or match between the work and the receiving consciousness, which would promote a boredom; a second proposes an imperfect fit that encourages efficacious activity in which comprehension is a complex of the facture and the reception.¹⁰¹

What Fisher describes is the dynamic between the artificer's production of the object and the subsequent perception of said object. Pleasure is derived from the capacity the work has to allow for an 'active aesthetics', where patterns of connectedness reveal themselves only as a consequence of a resistance to clarity. The collage forgoes absolute legibility in the final artefact and foregrounds the processes by which a final work is reached. This enables the reader to read for form as much as read for content, where a reading of the work requires a negotiation of its disparate landscape. Howe's chosen book title indicates that typographical anomaly is an indicator of her inclination for literary homogenisation. In *'Debths'*, the *'b'*, a mirror image of *'p'*, partially displaces the word from its normative place in the system of signifying relatives and brings it

¹⁰¹ Allen Fisher, 'The Poetics of Decoherence and the Imperfect Fit', p. 76.

into association with other words and their meanings. The meanings begin to overlap, to coalesce, to become indistinct.

In this context, the word 'depth' is not only a reference to Howe's exploration of 'broad historical vistas', particularly those relating to the powerful forces of colonial invasion and occupation.¹⁰² The word also signposts her poetics as an exploration of the contemporary self as an amalgam of 'names under names and names inside names'.¹⁰³ The collaged poem is the node at which the poet curates materials and the site of perception that enables experience in the perceiver. A 'reading' of the collage, its superimposed areas and its illegibility, enables phenomenological restorationism that appeals to the human inclination towards self-preservation. The form does this by both deconstructing and constructing text to explore the manner in which human experience can be explored.

When Lyotard describes the developmental inhuman as indifferent to the individual, for whom 'forgetting' is realised as "anguish... of a mind haunted by a familiar and unknown guest", he describes the tension of the collage.¹⁰⁴ Howe's method of examining memory seeks to overcome the developmental inhuman by reinstating the forgotten narrative in such a way that it enables reconstruction upon perception. The aim is not to provide a precise archival account, but to provide the conditions within which an account, however fractural, might be manufactured.

¹⁰² McLane, *The Paris Review*, p. 145.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 10.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 2.

CONCLUSION

The preceding pages of Volume One of this thesis have considered variously the means by which superimposition can be used in innovative poetic texts and posited consequences for the written word of the illegibility produced as a byproduct of the process. This begins with a taxonomy of the use of textual superimposition that indicates that its prevalence in poetic texts can be ascribed to both developments in innovative poetics and developments in printing and word processing technologies. The examples explored display various realisations of superimposition, from the seemingly tentative experiments with letter pressing by the Italian Futurists, to more extensive misuses of technologies by Bob Cobbing. What is clear is that absolute illegibility is rare in texts that explore superimposition as a formal and constructive principle. The total eradication of the graphemic gesture precludes the opportunity to explore the tensions present between the signifying capabilities of the written word and its material qualities. If language is our primal mode of communication, then the value of that attribute is reflected in works that test the boundaries of signification. Indeed, even when employed as material, language still asserts itself as a means of relating to the world.

The discussion in Chapter One revealed that the most conspicuous effect is the frustration of the process of signification, the very foundation of the linguistic communicative act, which occurs when some of the language in a text is rendered illegible by superimposition. If the reader seeks to continue to naturalise these texts via a 'reading' that conforms to normative modes it

becomes clear that, whilst formally integral to the work at large, the presence of illegible language does not indicate that the text be 'read' but instead signals the necessity to move towards alternate means of engaging with the text. Even in these cases, it is still possible, if not particularly profitable, to abide by normative reading modes to continue to make the language 'say' in the traditional sense. Indeed, for the experimental poet Nathan Walker, working with the disruption of the linguistic act premises a performativity that is central to the formal integrity of the work, but which also acts as score for performance. In this case, illegibility does not preclude a performance of the work, but widens the scope by which language can be engaged with vocally. For the casual reader, for whom an innovative vocal recitation is not the primary mode of engagement, reading is disrupted, and language does fail to 'say' in the traditional sense. The study of Walker's work revealed that, due to superimpositional processes, illegibility of the grapheme foregrounds the materiality of the written word. The text operates not only as 'read' but also as 'seen', and this requires alternate approaches to engagement with the work.

The intricacies of the consequences of superimposition are explored more closely in Chapter Two, particularly in relation to the progress of the incremental process of superimposition and its production of cumulative illegibility. The analysis revealed the evolution of the word from 'read' to 'seen' and provided a theoretical account of a phenomenological shift that renders the text not in 'textual', but in 'figural' space. The consequences of superimposition for the word are significant as I propose a use of language that transcends signification in order to produce objects that possess phenomenological autonomy. Towards this, the chapter stages the perceptive loss of signification via a reading that

depletes in its effectiveness as the overprinting process increases and intensifies. Conversely, Chapter Two displays the graduated movement of the text towards the figural spatial plane where the augmented work converses not with the mind as an interlocuter, but with the body as plastic object.

From this position, which accepts that poetic works that feature textual superimposition request of the perceiver alternate modes of engaging with the text, the argument continued with a discussion of Howe's *Debths*. Chapter Three provides an expansion of the understanding of how the writer may use superimposition. Howe's approach to the process of linguistic appropriation and collage reveals that illegibility is the node at which the politics of language can be not only explored, but also resisted. More specifically, Howe's work questions the primacy of the archive and the fundamentalism of its historical and biographical account. In the act of citation, collage ruptures the historicity of the text and, in its placement in a new context, provides the formal template by which language and power can be explored. The chapter also describes how, in innovative poetics, reading for form constitutes an extension of the process of appropriation and the subsequent collage of the materials. In a sense, the negotiation of the collage is a restorative act that allows for production of new sense, new meaning, from pre-existing but augmented language. In one sense, the thesis is a representation of the restrictions that notions of 'reading' place upon language. Its constituent chapters explore modes of diversification of the process produced via innovative developments to the use of the written word that foreground both process and form.

The poetics statement provides the space to investigate via an amalgam of discursive writings and textual superimpositions the nature of illegibility and

the ways it is possible to use it in poetic texts. The poetics does not provide a complete methodological account of the production of either the exegesis or the creative works. Instead, it behaves as a speculative discourse in which the exegetical and creative have become interconnected, informing of each other and of themselves. It stands as an indicator of the primary positions undertaken during investigation and as a measure of the progress and handling of the investigative process.

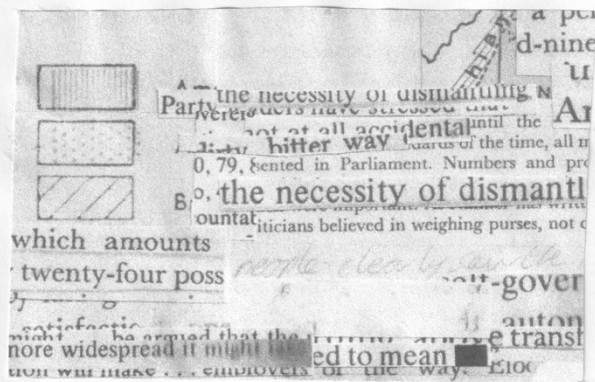
I do not intend to paraphrase the creative works, preferring instead to allow them to sit in silent dialogue with the discursive writings in Volume One. However, the forms of the creative works are indicative of the means by which the research questions have been investigated via creative means. The works have been produced from a range of source materials and composed via a diverse number of modes of composition.

POETICS



It is 1990. We have moved from Norris Green in Liverpool to a small village twenty miles north of the city called 'Banks', an outpost situated on the frontier of reality as we know it. Our accents, our lexicons, discordant with local linguistic conventions, exclude us from this new community, bound as it is by what we lack, a shared vernacular. Communicative decoherence, the gaps in comprehension between our own dialect and theirs, create an odd space that separates us. Just twenty miles up the coast, the same Irish Sea, the same shipping forecast, the same salt blown on the same air, and it is language, or a variation on it, that sets us apart. This is my first experience with the difficulty of my native language, of the use of English in a particular context, of its communicative capabilities and their deficiencies.

It is 2019. And the fascination persists. I remember learning as a child in a primary school that no longer exists that our Germanic stock is romanticised by borrowed French words such as 'language' and others such as 'communicate' from Latin. The geographical and temporal enormity of these osmotic shifts renders our own move up the coast insignificant. Indeed, I recall that some of my peers began to use the word 'sound' as an affirmative, a small example of our own language use beginning to pass through a linguistic membrane and assimilate with that of our neighbours. Our own linguistic variability disallowed conformity of communication, promoting instead an interchanging of words and syntactic structures that augmented the language of both the migrant and the resident speakers in that small English village. I learnt that the English language is not static. It is frogspawn in pondwater brought on the foot of the coot from another pool. Boundaries and the necessity of dismantling...



It is 2016, I read a collaborative poem called 'Written Over Again' by Alec Finlay and Ray DiPalma.¹ Finlay has handwritten the eponymous phrase on a white page, after which DiPalma has rewritten the phrase over the initial inscription. The two graphemic gestures consolidate into a single, linear signature in which the written linguistic act, defined as it is in the work by communicative cooperation, signals graphically of the expressive and communal nature of language. The phrase remains legible, but of course the process by which one inscription is placed over another must obscure the first at least in part, and perhaps the second also. Indeed, it becomes difficult to identify which inscription came first and which was added latterly, even more problematic to convincingly identify one from another in the malaise. Destruction enter the fray.

With these tensions in mind, I collage and collage and collage as a creative and exploratory method of destructive and reconstructive discovery. At first, I take a pencil and copy word-for-word the first of Shakespeare's sonnets: 'From fairest creatures we desire increased'. This first poem is legible in its entirety. I reposition my hand to the beginning of the first line, the tip of the pencil hovers over the first letter: 'F', and I continue to write the second sonnet: 'When forty winters shall besiege thy brow'. I repeat the process a further three times until I have, each on the same page and occupying the same textual space, the first five of Shakespeare's famous poems.

I sit and consider the consequence of making a legible graphemic gesture, as I did with the first inscription, and then obliterating it, either partly or in whole...

¹ Bean & McCabe, *The New Concrete*, p. 89.

The first thing I noticed when I stepped
 out of the car was the cold, crisp air.
 It felt like a fresh blanket after a long
 drive. The sun was just starting to
 peek over the horizon, painting the sky
 in soft, golden hues. The world was
 quiet, except for the distant hum of
 traffic and the occasional chirp of a bird.

I can feel the shapes of the letterforms affect the level of tension in the muscles in my shoulders. I write and look, and the body's centralising function underpins the spatial adjacency I experience between myself and the materiality of convoluting letterforms. I am not reading but seeing and the body dances with the indeterminate grapheme.

The year is 2017. My project, leaf litter in wind, language led away, dins.

I look out of a closed window in the office: a tree. 'The tree' is an object even if you cannot see it. If obscured by another structure and only partially visible, 'the tree' still signals its existential claim in those parts of its form that can still be identified; we see a leaf and collocation takes us back to 'the tree'.

What of language? Is 'the tree' a noun phrase even if we cannot read 'the tree', either partially or in its entirety? 'The tree' persists as a mark, a graphemic gesture, even in its perceptible absence as a small phrase written on a white page where other marks have encroached on its phenomenological space. What to make then of these marks, these gestures, made in the material of linguistic communication but obscured so as to resist a normative reading?

It's all there and not there, dinning outside of, within and under the lines. Letterform taxidermy butterflies, an abundance. What does it mean to take paper and ink and make it/unmake it?

Replace the ridge in the flatline, listen.

Back to the page and the pencil, take graphite and make it plastic in the page space. I write and I write and I write: 'the tree'...

the tree

the tree

the tree

the tree

the tree

the tree

It is 2018. On a visit to the Tate gallery in Liverpool I encounter a work by the abstract artist Gwyther Irwin, called *Letter Rain*. Produced in 1959, the work comprises one of a number by different artists curated in the Tate's 'Ideas Depot' exhibition. A collage, the image features 'Individual words and letters [that] are clearly legible in the upper half of the work. Further down, the deluge of letters subsides into a haze of pale fragments through which faint traces of letters are just visible'.² Here was a visual representation of communicative discordance, the alien phoneme made grapheme in a mass of tumbling, dissipating language. The work seems to trace osmotic shifts, composed as it is by a verticality of declining communicative marks such that, at the bottom of the work, the ghosts of a small number of scattered words manage to signal their existence amidst the torrent.

I read: a word like 'war' and another that looks like 'pensions'. I am reading myself (a war pensioner) into and out of the text. I am making my own history from letters I can barely detect...

² Tate [online], 'Gwyther Irwin: *Letter Rain*', 2019. Available from: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/irwin-letter-rain-t12032> [cited 4 February 2019].



It is 2019. The poem on preceding page lends itself to a 'reading' by way of its construction from linguistic material...

'You could do history. The troops a gloomy narchy problem, strike or the result. believe me, at you could do was believe me dis. 2 the problem (ignite?) a gloomy (magnet?). B education when it was put to strike. representatio all 74'.

The reading is satisfactory in its prosodic qualities and in the anti-collocative effect of collage. This is but one reading that takes as its cue the formal and compositional principles of its source to produce yet another 'reading' of the text....

You could do history. The troops a gloomy narchy problem, strike or the result. believe me, at you could do was believe me dis. 2 the problem (ignite?) a gloomy (magnet?). B education when it was put to strike. 74. representatio

You could do history. The troops a gloomy narchy problem, strike or the result. believe me, at you could do was believe me dis. 2 the problem (ignite?) a gloomy (magnet?). B education when it was put to the strike, 74. representatio

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To 'say' and to be perceived as 'saying'.

The 'written' and the 'read'.

The 'made' and the 'seen'.

Mapped out.

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